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Amalia Holst

Andrew Cooper

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Abstract: Amalia Holst's trailblazing book *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Education* (1802) dropped a bomb on the German speaking states – a bomb that failed to detonate. In one of the first works of philosophy in German published under a woman's name, Holst declares that it is time a member of the female sex spoke out about the plight of women in Germany. Despite her bold attempt to ignite a new movement of women's education, her book was harshly reviewed by male critics and thrust into obscurity. This Element presents the first comprehensive study of Holst's writings, unearthing their striking contribution to philosophy's growing awareness of the social conditions of human freedom. The force of her argument, and the difficulties she encountered, reveal the ambiguous character of the German Enlightenment and prompt us to reconsider what can be salvaged from it.

This Element also has a video abstract: www.Cambridge.org/EWHP_Cooper

Keywords: Amalia Holst, Enlightenment, education, vocation, critique

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1 Introduction

Amalia Holst was a teacher, pedagogue, and philosopher based in and around Hamburg during the late German Enlightenment.[1] Her trailblazing book *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Education* (2023 [1802]) was one of the first works of philosophy in German to be published under a woman's name.[2] Holst's writings disrupt a popular conception of the German Enlightenment as a movement in which philosophers boldly advanced the universal scope of human freedom. Think of Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' (1996a [1784]) or Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* (1987 [1800]); the canonical texts of the period sought to demonstrate that freedom is grounded in the structure of thought, such that every human being, considered in abstraction, has the capacity to think independently and legislate their own action. Yet free thinking and autonomous action are not realized in abstraction. For Kant and Fichte, reason is like a seed planted in the mind, requiring fertile soil and careful cultivation if it is to grow into maturity and bear fruit. One of the key tasks of philosophy is thus to define the education (*Bildung*) that will enable budding human beings to realize their vocation within the concrete conditions of society.[3] Holst recognized that the vision of freedom advanced under the banner of Enlightenment set a barrel of dynamite beneath the unjust institutions of modern society. In agreement with Kant and Fichte, she saw education as the means to ignite the Enlightenment's explosive potential, forming independent and reflective citizens to instate and inhabit just laws. Yet her experience as a pioneering school teacher unearthed a massive caveat in their arguments. The freedom of the human being was not extended to middle- and upper-class women. The education of women – when it was offered at all – was restricted to knowledge that would be useful for their narrowly prescribed domestic roles.

Scholars are becoming increasingly aware of the exclusions underpinning the freedoms advanced during the German Enlightenment. The pioneering work of Michael Banton (1967) and Peter Park (2013) demonstrated that the histories of philosophy produced by Kant and Christoph Meiners in the late eighteenth century removed Africa and Asia from the philosophical tradition. More recently, Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (2020) and Dalia Nassar and Kristin Gjesdal (2021) have shown that the historiography of philosophy practiced during the

[1] Some of the discussions in this Element develop ideas that appeared in an earlier form in my introduction to *On the Vocation of Woman*. See Cooper (2023).

[2] To my knowledge, it was preceded only by Dorothea Christiane Erxleben's little-known work, *Rigorous Investigation of the Causes that Obstruct the Female Sex from Study* (2019 [1742]). See Section 5.

[3] For an overview of the concept of vocation and the role it played in the German Enlightenment, see Cooper (2024a: 30–33).

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German Enlightenment deliberately omitted women. As philosophers continue to come to terms with the darker side of the Enlightenment, Holst's work offers a unique vantage, for it began to expose the Enlightenment's exclusionary logic from *within* the grip of its power. The force of her argument, and the difficulties she encountered, reveal the ambiguous character of the German Enlightenment and prompt us to reconsider what can be salvaged from it.

Holst's lifetime was marked by enormous social and political instability, which opened new opportunities for women at the very moment it provoked a conservative backlash against them. The rapid growth of an affluent middle-class challenged longstanding social hierarchies. The American and French Revolutions threatened the hereditary succession of power and the foundational role of the family in civic life. In this turbulent context, the architects of the German Enlightenment did not *overlook* certain members of society in their attempts to ground the freedom of the human being, as if they simply failed to tease out the full implications of practical reason. To maintain the social conditions that enabled the independent thinking they associated with freedom, they developed philosophical strategies to *qualify* freedom's universal scope.

Kant (1996a [1784]: 17), for instance, defined Enlightenment as the emergence from self-imposed immaturity as human beings cease from relying on external authorities and learn to think for themselves. For Kant, to think for oneself is not a private activity. Reason is used privately when it is subordinated to a social end; for example, when one acts as a soldier, a civil servant, or a pastor. To think for oneself – to exercise one's reason *in public* – is 'that use [of reason] which someone makes of it *as a scholar* [*als Gelehrter*] before the entire public of the *world of readers*' (Kant 1996a [1784]: 18). One of Kant's radical claims is that learnedness (*Gelehrsamkeit*) – the scholar's capacity to think independently and to use their knowledge to promote human happiness – should not be restricted to a literary elite.[4] Instead, learnedness should extend to *every* human being. While a soldier or civil servant must obey, his rationality entails that, when he is not in a position of civil subordination, he has 'full freedom, indeed the obligation, to communicate to his public all his carefully examined and constructive thoughts'.

What Kant says of Enlightenment, however, concerns the human being considered in its ideal form, which does not immediately apply to all individual

[4] Learnedness was a central concept in the German Enlightenment from its origins in the late seventeenth century. Christian Thomasius provided a foundational definition in 1699, linking the theoretical and practical dimensions of rationality in a single virtue. Learnedness, he wrote, is 'knowledge through which the human being is made capable of properly distinguishing the true from the false and the good from the bad, and of providing the true (or as the occasion demands, the probable) causes that ground it in order that he might promote his own temporal and lasting welfare, and that of others, in ordinary life and affairs' (Thomasius 2019 [1699]: 18).

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humans. On the non-ideal level, Kant developed a pragmatic anthropology that identifies the conditions under which real human beings, subject to the spatial and temporal conditions of nature, can hope to realize that ideal. While ideal theory states that human beings are equal by virtue of their rationality, anthropology informs us that nature, for the sake of humanity, intends them to be different. In the case of sex, for instance, it informs us that women are beautiful (aligned to the true and the good through the immediacy of feeling) and men sublime (aligned to the true and the good through the mediation of the intellect). The upshot of Kant's non-ideal theory is that nature does not intend every individual human being to exercise their reason in public. Women, Kant (1996b [1793]: 295) writes, are disqualified from active citizenship *by nature*.[5] Nature has destined women to be 'passive' citizens who 'lack civil personality' (Kant 1996c [1797]: 458). Kant (1996c [1797]: 458) assures us that the natural inequality between men and women does not contradict the freedom of the human being, for it is only 'as a people' that a collection of human individuals can conform to the conditions of freedom. When a people unite in the form of a state, the higher education of women would not only be unnecessary but also dangerous, for it would disrupt women's immediate orientation to the good and lead them to become unsatisfied with their dependent status.

Kant does not clearly explain why he thinks that nature has bestowed upon women a subordinate social status. Working-class men are also deemed to be passive citizens, for they do not own property (Kant 1996c [1797]: 458–9). Yet there are no philosophical or legal reasons preventing working-class men from acquiring property and thereby attaining an active status (Kant 1996b [1793]: 295). Women, in contrast, are *naturally* excluded from active citizenship. The fact that Kant does not provide reasons for this qualification suggests that, in his view, the determinations of nature are self-evident.

Fichte, the major successor of Kant's philosophical project, provides an explicit justification for the natural passivity of women. On the ideal level, Fichte (1987 [1800]) argues that free activity is the final end of every self-determining I. The vocation of the human being, considered in abstraction, is to perfect its activity; to subject nature to itself through the understanding and itself to nature through the will. On the non-ideal level, Fichte (2000 [1796]: 304) claims that 'the minds of men and women are, by nature, very different'. Fichte grounds his theory of sexual difference in the act of sex itself; woman, he claims, is the passive, retiring, and receiving sex. It would be 'absolutely contrary to reason

[5] 'The only quality required for [citizenship], besides the *natural* one (that it is neither woman nor child) is: that one is *one's own master* (*sui iuris*), and thus that one has some *property* (which also includes any skill, trade, fine art, or science) that provides for one'.

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for the second sex to have the satisfaction of its sexual drive as an end, for it would then have mere passivity as its end' (Fichte 2000 [1796]: 266). To demonstrate how the passive characteristic of femininity does not contradict woman's activity as a rational agent, Fichte appeals to the feminine virtue of modesty:

> the second sex, in accordance with nature's arrangement, exists at a level below that of the first . . . But at the same time, the two as moral beings are supposed to be equal. This was possible only because an entirely new level, one completely lacking in the first sex, was introduced into the second. . . . This natural law of woman gives rise to feminine modesty. (Fichte 2000 [1796]: 266, 268)

By inserting an 'entirely new level' into the second sex (i.e., feminine modesty), nature conditions the expression of its humanity. If a woman were to adopt an active stance towards her sexuality, her activity would contradict her nature. Female desire is thus incapable of fulfilment and takes the form of activity only by fulfilling male desire. The upshot of Fichte's non-ideal theory is that nature intends different and yet complementary practical outcomes for the sexes: man is destined to practical activity as an end, and woman is destined to activity by serving man. These complementary practical outcomes require distinct forms of education. A man requires extensive training in rational virtue and instruction concerning the principles of nature that underpin his activity. A woman's education should not disrupt her natural modesty with abstract learning but should instead provide her with a constitution fitting for her servitude.

To repeat, Kant and Fichte did not passively reproduce the gender norms of their time. They used their considerable intellectual powers to counteract the increasing opportunities available to women in Germany in the eighteenth century. The rapid growth of an educated middle class in the mid eighteenth century meant that women had greater access to scholarly journals, literary salons, and the time required to discuss matters of private and public concern. Yet as revolution erupted in France, the scholars of Germany interpreted the ensuing violence in Paris, Lyon, and the Vendée as a lesson of what takes place when individual rights are asserted over familial bonds. To curb the threat of social upheaval in their own lands, they staged what Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos (2004: 113) terms a 'conservative reaction', defending a complementarian view of marriage according to which unequal roles in the family lay the foundation for public life. From the late 1780s, a stream of publications on 'the vocation of woman' (*die Bestimmung des Weibes*) – all written by men – flowed into Germany's bookstores, seeking to fix woman's

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subordinate social position as nature's benevolent plan.[6] Consider Joachim Heinrich Campe's instructions to the daughters of Germany in *Fatherly Advice to My Daughter* (1789):

> You are a *human being*—thus destined for everything that the general calling of humanity entails. You are a *woman*—thus destined for and called to everything that woman is to be to man, to humanity, and to civil society. So you have a twofold vocation, one *general* and one *particular*, one as *human being* and one as *woman*. (Campe 1796 [1789]: 5)

Campe distinguishes between the ideal and non-ideal levels we noted in the work of Kant and Fichte. When considered as human beings, women are called to perfect the capacities given to them by nature. When considered as women, they are called to express that calling under the constraint of their vocation as wives, mothers, and housewives. A 'learned woman' (*gelehrte Frau*) – a woman who makes her intellectual activity her own end – is thus a contradiction in terms. Campe's rational determination of woman's subordinate social status placed women in a double bind. For a woman to challenge the subordinate position assigned to her sex, she must become a scholar. And yet to become a scholar, she must renounce her femininity.

The conservative reaction staged by the male scholars of Germany created an asymmetry between the opportunities available to women to learn, write, and publish their work and the philosophical prohibition on women's participation in the public sphere; an asymmetry they hoped to remove by disseminating their complementarian philosophy through learned books. Holst's *On the Vocation of Woman* exploits this asymmetry by presenting her considered thoughts to the world of readers. Writing under her own name, and refusing to adopt the supposedly genderless standpoint of the academy, she begins with a daring demand:

> In the name of our sex, I challenge men to justify the right they have presumed for themselves, which holds back an entire half of humankind, barring them from the source of the sciences and allowing them at most to skim their surface. (Holst 1802: 3/10)[7]

[6] Consider just a brief survey of titles on the vocation of woman: Ernst Brandes's *On Women* (1787), Christoph Meiners's *History of the Female Sex* (1788–1802), Joachim Heinrich Campe's *Fatherly Advice For My Daughter* (1789), Johann Ludwig Ewald's *The Art of Becoming a Good Girl, Wife, Mother, and Housewife* (1802), and Karl Friedrich Pockels's *Characteristics of the Female Sex* (1797–1802). Holst (1802: 1/9) introduces *On The Vocation of Woman* as a response to these texts: 'So much has been written about the female vocation in recent years. Men have dared to set a limit that our minds may not transgress.'

[7] References to *On the Vocation of Woman* refer to both the original text and the Oxford translation, separated by a forward slash.

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Holst's demand has a performative dimension; it is the action of a woman *and* of a scholar. Her goal is to demonstrate that a woman's calling is not limited to the natural, private sphere of the home. The action of an enlightened spouse, an educator-mother, and a compassionate neighbour has intellectual, public implications. Reappropriating Kant's claim that a man's calling as a soldier is consistent with the duty to exercise his reason in public, Holst contends that a woman's particular calling does not restrict her participation in the general human vocation to perfect one's capacities and to promote the good of the whole. Like men, women must pursue the higher education of their minds and acquire an intellectual grasp of the principles that underpin their sphere of influence. To this extent Holst positions herself as an advocate of the Enlightenment; she seeks to persuade her readers that to qualify the scope of humanity is to inhibit the social instantiation of reason. Presenting her case before 'the judgment seat of sound reason' (Holst 1802: 99/43), she declares that the Enlightenment is futile without the higher education of women.

Despite aligning her demand with the goals of the Enlightenment, *On the Vocation of Woman* is not a straightforward Enlightenment text. As we will see, Holst develops a novel conception of Enlightenment according to which the exercise of reason demands social recognition. Her aim is to demonstrate that the qualifications made by the proponents of Enlightenment contradict the structure of rationality as it appears in every human being. Moreover, she seeks to expose the efforts of learned men to justify the inequalities that serve their social standing as the product of fear rather than reason. In contrast to Kant and Fichte, Holst seeks to advance the Enlightenment not by systematic theorizing but by critique; that is, by exposing the fallacious arguments of her peers such that the scope of reason expands dialectically. Holst thus rejects a core conviction of the German Enlightenment – that (German) philosophy marks the summit of reason's progress – and argues instead that Enlightenment is a vulnerable, incomplete process that is currently being hindered by Germany's learned men. In this sense her work marks a transition from the *querelle des femmes* – a debate spanning from the fifteenth century to the French Revolution concerning women's social opportunities – to modern feminism, understood as the critique of misogyny and the defence of women's civic rights.[8] In fact, Holst's work arguably stages this transition in the German context, for her critique of male privilege outstrips the arguments made by her female contemporaries, who defended the role of educator-mothers to pass on

[8] For a discussion of the *querelle des femmes* as a historiographical paradigm, see Bock and Zimmermann (1997) and Zimmermann (2002).

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enlightened wisdom to their daughters, and envisages a space in which women as professional teachers take a leading role in the education of humanity.

To highlight the radical dimension of her work, several commentators have reclaimed Holst as Germany's equivalent to Mary Wollstonecraft (Rahm 1983: 153; Sotiropoulos 2004: 107–8).[9] Such a portrayal places Holst within an illustrious group of early feminists, including Olympe de Gouges and Germaine de Staël, who connected the rights of women to women's educational opportunities. Yet a brief look at the reception of Holst's work suggests that her influence in the history of feminism is staggeringly minor in comparison to her more illustrious peers. Early reviews of her work signal a profound antipathy among the scholars of Germany to the notion of women's rights and studies are yet to find evidence that her writings impacted following generations of German feminists. Holst was not named in histories of German feminism until the twentieth century and her work remained obscure until Berta Rahm's revised edition of *On the Vocation of Woman* in 1983.[10]

The neglect of Holst's work reflects a broader trend in the historiography of philosophy that has only recently come to light. In the French context, Geneviève Fraisse (1995) reveals how the demand for civic equality during the French Revolution coincided with the exclusion of women from public life. In the English context, Eileen O'Neill (1998: 33) traces the construction of an 'oxymoron problem' in the late eighteenth century as male writers advanced an essentialist account of gender such that women, by definition, could not be identified as philosophers. And in the German context, Claudia Honegger (1991: 53) identifies 'a kind of "men's movement"' in the 1790s with the explicit aim of 'curbing the influence of wives and women on the state and society'.[11] Holst was certainly alive to a version of the oxymoron problem raised by her contemporaries. In *On the Vocation of Woman*, for instance, she addresses a public letter circulated by the theologian and popular writer Christian Friedrich Sintenis, which declares that 'a so-called learned woman [gelehrte Frau] is and remains either a laughable or an adverse creature' (Sintenis 1796: III 280–1). Incensed by Sintenis' claim that learned women are 'monstrous' – the violation of a natural category – Holst shows how the same logic applies to learned men. Yet Holst does not view the oxymoron problem as a mere philosophical error to be fought with counterarguments.

[9] I have made this claim myself in Cooper (2024b). My intention, however, was provocative; connecting Holst with Wollstonecraft can help us to highlight the *differences* between their work.

[10] Holst first appears in the historiography of German feminism in Volume 1 of Gertrud Bäumer's *Handbuch der Frauenbewegung* (1901).

[11] More recently, Ebbersmeyer (2020: 444) traces a concerted effort in the publishing industry to 'keep women out of academia in general and out of philosophy in particular'.

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She is starkly aware that the assertions of learned men gain their currency from the social conditions that bind women in a state of servitude:

> Surrounded by trivialities from youth onwards, tied up with trinkets, chastened by coercion, and held back by an idleness that feels like comfort, how can, how should, a woman's mind penetrate through this fourfold fog and find the light? (Holst 1802: 89–90/39)

This is no rhetorical question. Given her conviction that the Enlightenment cannot advance while half of humankind lies in chains, Holst's answer is deceptively simple. To break the coercive forces holding back half the population requires the higher intellectual education of women. Higher intellectual education, as Holst sees it, is not limited to the classroom but encompasses an expansive, goal-directed movement towards the ideal of humanity.

Returning to Holst's work demonstrates that the absence of women in the historiography of German philosophy is not due to a lack of powerful texts by women. When we overlook the work of women writers in the German tradition, we reinforce a prevailing conception of the Enlightenment that privileges the ideal determination of human freedom presented by the likes of Kant and Fichte over the non-ideal critique of male privilege that began to circulate in women's magazines and popular journals at the end of the eighteenth century. While Holst's importance as a philosopher is certainly difficult to defend on the grounds of influence or systematicity, a brief look at Kant's and Fichte's qualified universality suggests that such grounds are questionable markers of philosophical merit. This is not to say that Kant's or Fichte's work is no longer valuable. It is to say that without investigating the response of women writers to their work, we fail to appreciate what it meant to, and the impact it had on, members of society it deemed to be passive.

In this study, I argue that the philosophical importance of Holst's writings lies in the conceptual space it carves out within the restrictive landscape of the German Enlightenment. Holst's power as a philosopher, I claim, lies in the rhetorical creativity and philosophical dexterity of her writing, which enabled her to disrupt and begin to transform unjust social conditions from within. While the limits on public reason have substantively changed over the past two centuries, unequal access to the avenues of power continues to form a structural feature of contemporary discourse. Examining the limits imposed on one woman at the turn of the nineteenth century can attune us to the injustices that remain embedded in the conceptual frameworks of our own time. To appreciate the full force of Holst's work, however, requires some imaginative effort on our part, for we must become familiar with the constraints on women writers at the turn of the nineteenth century. My approach in this study is thus to

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reconstruct Holst's arguments in their context, demonstrating how she leverages her experience as a teacher into a deep and enduring critique of the Enlightenment.

Holst's obituarists record that her published work amounted to three pieces of writing produced during a relatively short period of her life (1791–1802): a small, anonymously authored book on modern pedagogy, a series of signed letters on women's fiction, and the major work published under her own name, *On the Vocation of Woman*.[12] After a brief sketch of her life in Section 2, Sections 3, 4, and 5 consider each of her published works in turn. I will not be able to cover the full scope of her arguments here.[13] Instead, my aim is to highlight the argumentative strategies she employs to improve the status of women. While Holst's primary strategy is to demonstrate that the sphere of influence appropriate to a wife, mother, and housewife extends to the public domain, thus requiring a higher education, her argument does not simply extend the conventional roles of women. By demonstrating that the perfectibility of the mind precedes the normative demands of one's sex, Holst subtly and yet powerfully demonstrates that women – at least, middle- and upper-class women – must be permitted to pursue higher learning for its own sake.[14] For a woman to find a path through the fourfold fog (trivialities, trinkets, coercion, and luxury), her education must empower her to *feel* the dignity that reason demands and therefore to expect recognition in society.

2 Amalia Holst, née von Justi

The circumstances leading up to Amalia Holst's writing career were extremely rare. Her birth certificate (reproduced in Rahm 1983: 154) records that Johanna Paulina Amalia von Justi was born on 10 February 1758 to Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi and his second wife, Johanna Maria Magdalena Merchand. Justi was a prolific academic and infamous state official who defended progressive views about the political and economic future of Prussia. While the Justi family were part of the rapidly growing middle class, Justi's unconventional career and controversial opinions frequently placed the family in financial difficulty. In the 1750s, Justi rose to fame across Europe due to his academic achievements and cameralist vision of a centralized Prussian economy. His career began as a teacher of German language and rhetoric in Vienna and

[12] The obituaries can be found in translation in Holst (2023: 111–15).

[13] For a more extensive reconstruction of Holst's arguments, see Cooper (2023: xxxvii–xlvii).

[14] In Section 5, we will see that Holst did not advocate for the education of working-class women. Whether the restricted scope of argument reflects an ideological commitment to class-based politics or a pragmatic constraint to ensure publication is an open question. I propose a middle position.

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progressed to a lectureship at the University of Göttingen. There he founded the first programme of study in economics, established several journals on social and political matters, and published extensively in economics and political science (see Reinert 2009: 33). In 1756 his first wife left him, claiming that she had been neglected. After a long and vicious legal proceeding, the couple divorced and Justi was forced to sell his library to cover alimony (Reinert 2009: 40). The children remarkably stayed with their father, who left Göttingen in 1757 to pursue his interest in economic development in Denmark-Norway. The family relocated to Altona, a liberal outpost of Denmark on the outskirts of Hamburg. Justi remarried and within the year Amalia was born, the first of six children to his second marriage. Justi's radical views, expressed in a critical essay on the low value of Prussia's currency, landed him in prison for a short time in 1759, prompting the University of Göttingen to revoke his professorship. Justi moved the family to Berlin in 1760 to consolidate his academic work on economic theory and political science, which amounted to an astonishing sixty-seven books and seven edited journals. While his published works earned a modest annual income of 200 thaler, the high cost of living in Berlin forced him to relocate the family to Bernau, just north of Berlin, in 1762.

In keeping with her father's career, Amalia's education was unconventional. Few middle-class women in eighteenth-century Germany received schooling beyond their teenage years, and the early education of girls tended to focus on music, handicraft, and rudimentary lessons in history, geography, and literature. Justi felt strongly that the current pedagogical opportunities available to women reflected the state's failure to harness the full potential of its population. In several early publications he proposed to establish civic courts administered and elected by women officials (Justi 1745: 131) and advocated for civic reform by establishing 'a rational education for the female sex' (Justi 1747: 312). Justi's views on women's education and participation in civic life were radical but not unique. In Göttingen, they resonated with a liberal group of academics who were critical of Johann Bernhard Basedow's gendered pedagogy. The political scientist August Ludwig Schlözer and theologian Johann David Michaelis conducted the education of their daughters as an experiment to disprove Basedow's claim that higher learning detracted from feminine qualities (see Johns 2014: 47–54). Several of the 'Göttingen daughters' became noted writers and translators, including Caroline Michaelis, Dorothea Schlözer, Therese Heyne, and Meta Wedekind. While Justi lacked the resources and time to offer the kind of upbringing curated by Schlözer and Michaelis, he nevertheless ensured that his daughters received the same education as his sons.

A breakthrough in Justi's career took place in 1765 when his academic work was noticed by Frederick the Great, who appointed the precocious economist as

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chief mining officer of Prussia and financial manager of state property. While a prominent civic role and the chance to influence the king was precisely what Justi had been looking for, the position was ultimately his undoing. In 1768, through circumstances that never fully come to light, Justi was accused of embezzling state funds and placed under house arrest at his own expense. To relieve his family of the financial stress, and to prepare his defence, Justi elected to spend his pretrial detention in the state fortress at Küstrin. In 1771, before the accusations came to court, Justi unexpectedly died. Jügern Backhaus (2009a: xi) speculates that it is unlikely that Justi was guilty of the charges. The situation may have resulted from a misunderstanding related to his unconventional economic views, or the embezzlement may have been committed by his aide, who, aware of Justi's growing blindness, could have meddled with the state's financial records. Whatever the case, Justi's death was a shock to the family, who were entirely dependent on his salary for their livelihood. His wife entered a sustained period of grief, which prevented Amalia from publishing several of her father's letters that she hoped would vindicate the family's name.[15] The fine of 2,878 thaler (roughly one and a half years of Justi's salary at the time of his arrest) was annulled when it became clear that Justi's estate was unable to pay, and the state took responsibility for the education of his children (Backhaus 2009b: 18). Amalia's brothers were sent to a Danish cadet school and her younger sisters went to a convent in Potsdam (Spitzer 2001: 165). The estate in Bernau was sold, including Justi's scientific collection and library. His widow moved to be with her brother, a pastor in Braunschweig.

What happened to Amalia during this period is unknown. In a letter written in midlife, she notes in passing that she entered professional teaching at the age of fifteen, the year following her father's death. It was during those early years as a teacher, she recalls, that she became convinced that 'the ennoblement of humanity' requires the higher education of women (Holst 1802b). The extensive pedagogical experience displayed in her first book, *Observations on the Errors of Our Modern Education from a Practical Educator* (1791), suggests that she continued to work as a teacher or governess. We pick up the trail of Amalia's life when she moved to Hamburg in 1791 to join two of her sisters, Luisa and Carolina. The following year, at the relatively late age of thirty-three, she married Dr Johann Ludolf Holst, a lawyer who directed a pedagogical institute in Hamburg-St Georg.[16] Over the next five years, Amalia and Ludolf had three children, Eduard (b. 1792), Emilie (b. 1794), and Mariane (b. 1796).

[15] See Beckmann's (1806) note regarding his exchange with Amalia in *Vorrath kleiner Anmerkungen über mancherley gelehrte Gegenstände*, which can be found in translation in Holst (2023: 111).

[16] The average marrying age for a woman at the time was between 17 and 22 (Kleinau 2000: 323).

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The discussion of marriage in Amalia's published letters, along with the passing references to conversations with her husband in *On the Vocation of Woman*, suggests that she and Ludolf enjoyed lively debate over learned matters and viewed their marriage as a bond of equals. From 1792 to 1802, the couple ran Ludolf's institute together, with Amalia as headmistress of the preschool. Complimenting their shared work at the school, each spouse encouraged and commented on the other's writing. In a book on maritime law published in 1802, the same year as Amalia's *On the Vocation of Woman*, Ludolf reflected on their shared writing endeavours in a dedication addressed to the King:

> Sire! It is certainly the first example in the history of scholarship, in all its branches and among all nations, that two people bound by marriage have simultaneously dedicated their work to the King and Queen of a country.
>
> But what makes this case even rarer, almost inimitable for all times to come, is that both authors have taken it upon themselves to defend the noblest rights; she, in a provocative treatise on the beautiful half of humankind, with regards to the disputed rights of their higher intellectual education; he, in the serious courts of men, where the rights of peoples are decided. (Holst 1802: 3–4)

Ludolf's dedication unites the ideals of the romantic and the working couple, reflecting a vision of marriage emerging in Germany's literary circles embodied by couples such as Johann Christoph Gottsched and Luise Adelgunde Victorie Kulmus, who co-edited the literary journal *The Judicious Female Critics*. Moreover, it evokes the egalitarian definition of marriage in the third edition of Theodor von Hippel's enormously popular (and enormously controversial) book *On Marriage* (1793).[17] The shape of marriage was evidently an ongoing point of discussion between the Holsts. In *On the Vocation of Woman*, for instance, Amalia builds on Hippel's study when she states that the end of marriage is 'to form the highest ideal of humanity in the most beautiful union' (Holst 1802: 99/43).

What happened to the Holsts after 1802 is somewhat difficult to put together. According to Hamburg city registry records, Ludolf sold the family home in 1802 (Kleinau 2000: 323). It seems that he did not live in Hamburg again until 1810, when he became headmaster of a school in Hamburg's Neustadt district. From Amalia's obituaries we can gather that following her involvement in

[17] For a discussion of Hippel's definition of marriage, see Section 5.3. *On Marriage* ran to four separate editions by 1794 and seven reprintings by 1841. As Mayor of Königsberg, Hippel went to great efforts to conceal his authorship of such a controversial book; Kant was among the select group of friends to know the author's true identity. After the third edition was published in 1793, which defended a radical vision of equality in marriage, rumours began to spread that Kant was in fact the author. Following Hippel's death in 1796, Kant revealed Hippel to be the book's actual author, opening a fierce debate concerning the mayor's legacy.

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Ludolf's institute, she went on to establish her own pedagogical institutes in Boizenburg and Parchim, where she taught alongside her daughters (see Holst 2023: 111–14). One obituarist notes that she also established an institute in Hamburg, but there is no official record of such a school (see Holst 2023: 112).[18] City records suggest that Ludolf remained in Hamburg from 1810 until his death in 1825, so it is possible that the couple lived apart for some years (Kleinau 2000: 323).[19] Remaining letters suggest that Amalia's pioneering work as a teacher was known by several prominent members of the Enlightenment movement in Hamburg, including the writer August Hennings, the bookseller Franz August Gottlob Campe (nephew of Joachim Heinrich Campe), and the salonist Elise Reimarus (daughter of Hermann Samuel Reimarus).[20] One of her obituarists offers an illuminating portrait of her work as a teacher:

> she did not educate her female students merely for domestic service, or for society, or for the so-called refined side of life. Rather, she educated them for life as a whole and opened the wellspring in spirit and mind for a loving and intelligent fulfilment of everything that the female vocation demands of woman in religious and cosmopolitan respects. (Anonymous 1829: 741)

This description of Amalia's work takes us to the heart of her pedagogy, which we will unpack in the following sections. A thorough education does not distract a woman from her calling as a wife or mother but empowers her to grasp the spiritual significance of her life and thus to pursue her calling as an expression of her humanity. Despite aligning her position with the goals of Enlightenment, Amalia's progressive contemporaries were not always receptive to her views. For instance, when Campe sent a copy of *On the Vocation of Woman* to Elise Reimarus shortly after its publication, hoping that she would promote the book among Hamburg's literary circles, Reimarus thanked him for the gift but regretted to inform him that, given her dislike for matters concerning 'the alleged rights of women', she must return the copy 'without leafing through it' (Reimarus, cited in Spalding 2005: 216 n46). Reimarus' comments indicate that not all educated women thought that women's rights should be defended.

Several obituaries report that Amalia received a doctorate from the University of Kiel in her later life (see Holst 2023: 111–14). Yet the reports are doubtful. A biographical entry in a collection of Hamburg writers denies such a claim (see Holst 2023: 114–15) and there is no record of Amalia's name

[18] In a letter to August Hennings in 1802, Holst (1802b) expresses a desire to start a school in Hamburg, but it not clear whether her plans eventuated.

[19] Kleinau speculates that the couple had separated, but there is no substantive evidence to suggest that Amalia and Ludolf were estranged.

[20] See Holst (1802b), Holst (1824), Reimarus, cited in Spalding (2005).

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in the university archives at Kiel (see Cooper 2023: xviii). In a letter written in 1824, Amalia wrote to Campe requesting his help to publish a new book manuscript (Holst 1824). It seems that Campe refused to lend his assistance and the manuscript's contents and whereabouts are unknown (see Dyck forthcoming). At the very least, Amalia's request shows that she continued to write and engage with pedagogical debates throughout her life. She lived the final part of her life in Groß-Timkenberg under the care of her son (Anonymous 1857: 31). Amalia Holst died in 1829, aged 70.

3 An Unnamed Critic of Modern Education

Holst's earliest known work is a short, anonymous book entitled *Observations on the Errors of Our Modern Education from a Practical Educator* (1791). While it became increasingly common for women to publish letters in popular journals in the late eighteenth century, it was extremely uncommon for women to write scholarly books. On the rare occasions women participated in academic debate, they tended to do so anonymously. Anonymity was partly a matter of reputation. If a woman were to be criticized for having scholarly ambitions, it could seriously damage her or her husband's social standing. Reputational damage also affected publishers, which inclined editors to make conservative decisions in an oversaturated literary market. Yet anonymity was not simply a marker of a woman's precarious social position. It was also a noteworthy feature of philosophical expression, allowing women to develop distinct literary personas unencumbered by social constraints (see Easley 2017: 7). Women writers often claimed that their restricted access to the public sphere freed them from the vices that befell learned men, who write for public acclaim and career advancement rather than in service of their nation (Staël 1800 [1799]: 306–7; c.f. [Holst] 1791: 32–3; Holst 1802: 66–67/32). While Holst withholds her name from the text, her gender is evident in the book's title (*von einer praktischen Erzieherinn*; see Figure 1). In the preface, the editor Johann Gottwerth Müller (1791: Vorrede) reassures potential readers that the author is the daughter of an 'eminent scholar' and that her extensive experience as a teacher makes her a worthy critic of modern education.

The book documents a series of observations by a professional teacher on the effects of an enormous shift that took place in the German education system over the course of the eighteenth century. At the start of the century, only 5 per cent of the German population were literate (Nenon 2020: 26). Education was the privilege of a small aristocratic class who were taught by private tutors in the home. Scholars at universities taught in Latin and the aristocracy conversed mainly in French. The number of schools began to

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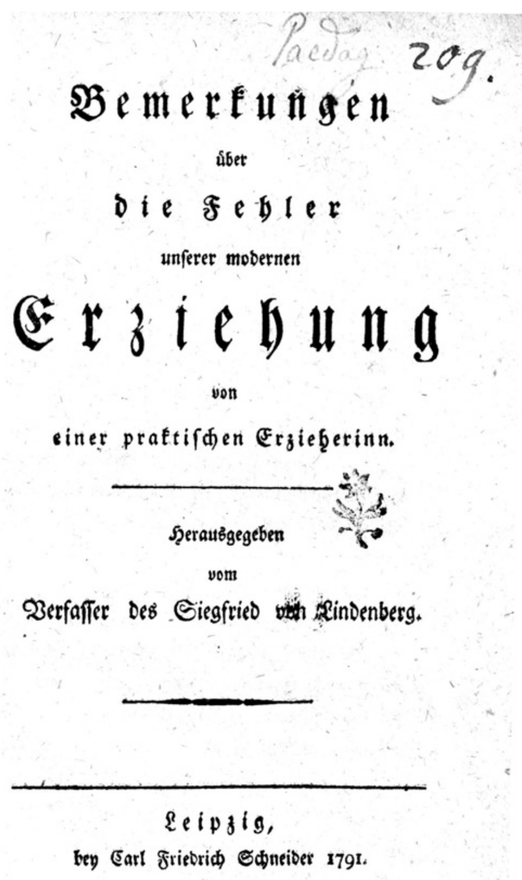

Paedag. 209.

Bemerkungen

über

die Fehler

unserer modernen

Erziehung

von

einer praktischen Erzieherinn.

Herausgegeben

vom

Verfasser des Siegfried von Lindenberg.

Leipzig,

bey Carl Friedrich Schneider 1791.

Figure 1 Title page of *Observations on the Errors of Our Modern Education*

increase in the early 1700s and literacy rose to 25 per cent towards the end of the century. Until the 1750s, most schools were run by the church and taught the *septem artes liberales* (seven liberal arts), a strict programme of grammar and rhetoric grounded in the recitation of classical texts (Lohmann & Mayer 2007: 116–18). In the mid eighteenth century, reformers began to argue that the church education was no longer fit for the needs of a rapidly growing middle class. Under the direction of Frederick the Great, the state steadily took over the school system. Texts such as Johann Spalding's *Consideration of the Vocation of the Human Being* (1997 [1748]) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1979 [1762]) placed the question of education at the heart of the German Enlightenment. Several prominent voices in the movement, including Johann Christoph Gottsched (1759), ridiculed the Latin system of rhetoric and promoted a new programme of education in the vernacular based on speech and

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public reasoning. Johann Bernhard Basedow's hugely influential *Method Book for Fathers and Mothers of Families and Peoples* (1770) pioneered a non-coercive system of education aligned with the students' natural capacities. In 1774, Basedow founded a model school in Dessau called the Philanthropin, which acted as a training ground for modern pedagogues and a pilot for the state's educational reform. The school attracted the support of prominent Enlighteners such as Kant, who praised the Philanthropin as a much-needed alternative to the Pietist schooling he received as a child. Acting as the primary fundraiser for the Philanthropin in the 1770s, Kant (2007 [1776]: 100) declared that 'never before has a more just demand been made on the human species, and never before has such a great and more self-extending benefit been unselfishly offered'.[21] Between 1785 and 1792, Joachim Heinrich Campe, who briefly succeeded Basedow as Principal of the Philanthropin, edited a multi-volume textbook on modern pedagogy, for which he arranged new translations of Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and Rousseau's *Emile*.

By the time Holst's book was published in 1791, the academic field of pedagogy had consolidated in German universities and become a central topic of public debate in popular journals and books. *Observations on the Errors of Our Modern Education* recounts the rise of German pedagogy and presents a bold critique of its major trends. Not only does the anonymous author position herself as a scholar in the field of pedagogy, but she also claims that the new German pedagogues, in the attempt to apply Locke and Rousseau to their local education system, failed to advance modern education. In fact, she argues that they have introduced several new errors. These errors betray a poor understanding of a child's development, Holst contends, and must be corrected if the reforms in German education are truly to advance the Enlightenment.

Recent scholarship has noted both the novelty and force of Holst's argument. Helen Fronius (2007: 206) claims that *Observations* is 'the first critique of the philanthropist movement published by a woman'. Robert Louden (2021: 75) states that Holst was 'the most significant feminist critic of Enlightenment educational theories'. In this section, I explore an overlooked implication of Holst's critique that will become important for her later work. While Holst's account of modern education in Germany is unambiguously critical, it nevertheless opens a positive vision of modern pedagogy centred on a single, devoted teacher who attends to a child's unique abilities as its body and mind develops on its own unique course. If education is to enliven the student to their vocation as a human being, Holst contends, it must be tailored to their particular capacities and developmental stage. The elementary books and general curricula

[21] For a discussion of Kant's curious attraction to Basedow's project, see Louden (2012).

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prescribed by Basedow and Campe cannot replace a teacher who attends to the child's unique developmental course and has a mastery of the sciences.

In Section 3.1, I briefly outline Holst's critical survey of the development of German pedagogy. In Section 3.2, I then unpack the four errors she identifies in modern education. Throughout her diagnosis, Holst considers how the new system of education outlined by Locke, Rousseau, and Basedow should be applied in practice. While the argument defended in *Observations* is not explicitly gendered, in Section 3.3 I argue that it subtly undermines the gendered curriculum advanced by Basedow and Campe. A central implication of her critique, one she will develop at length in *On the Vocation of Woman*, is that the person best placed to give the sustained and dedicated care required for education is, in the earliest years at least, the child's mother.

3.1 Education and Enlightenment

Holst (1791: 31) introduces her book as a response to 'the writings of our best pedagogues, namely Rousseau, Basedow, Campe, Salzmann, and others besides'. While her critical remarks rarely attack their specific arguments, it quickly becomes apparent that Basedow and Campe are her primary targets. She begins with a chapter entitled 'Sketch of the History of Education of the Eighteenth Century as an Introduction to our subject', which is followed by a subtitle that signals her critical intentions: 'Comparison of the Errors Made in Education Before and After the Basedowian Era'. Holst's goal is to take stock of the achievements made over the past century and to discern what has been gained under Basedow's influence on German pedagogy. From the book's opening pages, she positions herself as a participant in the Enlightenment project, imbued with a deep concern for the progress of reason:

> The attentive observer of human history notices with deepest pleasure when, with the continued development of the powers of his species, so many errors disappear, abuses are lifted, and light and order become visible where before there was darkness and disorder. But sorrow fills his soul when he realizes that what has been gained on one side is lost again on the other. ([Holst] 1791: 9–10)

In agreement with Basedow, Holst argues that until the eighteenth century, education was undertaken in a careless manner. The early education of children was left to nurses and maids, who, in the years preceding their formal education, filled their minds with superstition and folk knowledge. Once the children entered the schooling system, the curriculum was piecemeal, consisting of a loose programme of reading, writing, religion, and foreign languages. Teachers viewed the children as lacking in self-control, such that the task of

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education was to impose discipline through external constraint. The situation remained unaltered, Holst writes, until Locke presented a new anthropology in the seventeenth century, according to which a child's early treatment is not unimportant for its future prospects but has an irreparable effect on what they will become. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke argued that children are born without pre-existing ideas and imbued only with natural inclinations. Thus conceived, the primary task of education is not to fill empty minds with facts but to work with the child's free capacity of association as it acquires ideas through sensory engagement with the natural world (Locke 1693: 75–9). In Holst's (1791: 13) words, Locke 'showed that early, purposeful instruction saves time and effort, while slavish treatment hinders, if not completely prevents, the development of the human mind'.

Holst's pedagogy retains several Lockean elements. She affirms Locke's emphasis on early parenting, which leaves an indelible mark on the child's moral formation, and extends his claim that vices should be dealt with swiftly as they arise in the course of the child's development. In agreement with Locke, she argues that parents should not simply instil good habits through repetition and clear guidance but also through example. Locke and Holst agree that defects in a child's character reveal more about the pedagogical environment than the child's natural disposition. Yet Holst's reading of Locke is modulated by the next figure in her historical survey. Rousseau, she recounts, built on Locke's anthropology and yet placed greater emphasis on the role of nature in the child's formation:

> [Rousseau] presented the youth from its lovable, innocent side, and sought to free it even more from absurd and pedantic constraints. He proved that education does not consist in the teaching of the sciences alone but should follow nature's course, so that the student becomes all the freer. In this way, the foremost business of education is to guide the student's own thinking and free action. ([Holst] 1791: 13)

The basic premise of Rousseau's pedagogy, according to Holst, is that human beings are born free. Where Locke recommended a comprehensive curriculum and a strict programme of repetition, Rousseau advocated for a non-coercive upbringing aligned to the student's own interests. 'Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things', Rousseau (1979 [1762]: 37) writes in the opening lines of *Emile*, whereas 'everything degenerates in the hands of man'. Children have a natural capacity to make associations and learn from nature. The products of culture, including books and prescribed curricula, coerce the child's mind into the forms of thinking and doing that underwrite the unjust institutions of modern society. In contrast, Rousseau advocates a non-

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coercive education that does not compel but rather engages the child's natural faculties:

> Since everything which enters into the human understanding comes there through the senses, man's first reason is a reason of the senses; this sensual reason serves as the basis for intellectual reason. Our first masters of philosophy are our feet, our hands, our eyes. To substitute books for all that is not to teach us to reason. It is to teach us to use the reason of others. It is to teach us to believe much and never to know anything. (Rousseau 1979 [1762]: 125)

Holst notes that Locke's empiricism, refined by Rousseau's insight into the child's natural capacities, places the student at the centre of the pedagogical context. The pioneering work of the two great pedagogues of the modern era placed England and France at the forefront of educational reform; at least until the mid eighteenth century, when Basedow 'awakened the imitative spirit of the Germans' ([Holst] 1791: 13). In the preface to the *Method Book*, Basedow (1880 [1770]: xi) declared that his aim is to remedy the 'great disorder in the usual style of teaching in schools' with a new programme of learning. The disorder traces back to the early eighteenth century, when schools used the Latin system to press the natural faculties of students into a mould that is 'without reality' (Basedow 1880 [1770]: xi). To apply the new pedagogy to the German context, Basedow (1880 [1770]: 18) proposed a programme of education aligned to the 'the natural order of cognition'. A non-coercive curriculum begins by engaging the senses, works towards the rational ordering of ideas, and culminates in the public use of reason through the expression of words. Holst (1791: 13–14) explains that while the Germans 'cannot claim the honour of having invented an art and discovered a science, they at least strive for the glory of having brought it to the level of perfection'. Their ambition transformed the landscape of German schooling, such that 'Everywhere one saw new institutes established, school improvements made, and Philanthopine founded' ([Holst] 1791: 14). With the explosion of new writings and schools inspired by Basedow's reform, the Germans 'call out with triumphant voices: we are here! We have arrived at the summit! Through us the great work has been brought to perfection!' ([Holst] 1791: 14). Proponents of the Enlightenment were seduced by Basedow's grandiose claims, filling bookshops and school libraries with literature for children.

Holst's scorn for the Philanthropinists' self-acclaimed pre-eminence is thinly veiled. While she expresses her support for a new programme of education based on the student's natural capacities, she argues that Basedow and his colleagues introduced a series of errors into the German schooling system. Despite claiming to ground the pedagogical context in the natural

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ordering of cognition, they overemphasize the use of reasoning with young children and underplay kinaesthetic learning, play, and imitation ([Holst] 1791: 22). They fail to recommend age-appropriate lessons, and thus excite children's imaginations without the proper groundwork ([Holst] 1791: 34). By promoting the use of general elementary books, they overlook each child's particular needs ([Holst] 1791: 47). And by engaging the students with colourful children's literature, they over-stimulate the imagination and stifle the organic maturation of virtue ([Holst] 1791: 74). The four errors of modern education endow the sons and daughters of Germany with four corresponding vices: 'stubbornness and unpredictability, superficial ignorance, arrogance and fame-seeking, and that unfortunate early maturity which enervates mind and body' ([Holst] 1791: 19).

3.2 The Errors of Modern Education

Holst unpacks the four errors of modern education in the chapters that follow her brief historical survey. The opening chapter is titled 'Excessive and premature reasoning produces stubbornness and disobedience in the young' ([Holst] 1791: 22). Holst's first move is to show that despite claiming to ground the pedagogical context in the natural ordering of cognition, the Philanthropinists overemphasize the use of reasoning with young children and underplay kinaesthetic learning, play, and imitation. Returning to Locke, she argues that the formation of a child's capacity to act in light of reasons first requires the teacher to 'speak just as determinately as the child acts' ([Holst] 1791: 24). The child must learn that the teacher is serious and possesses the power to enforce their command, Holst claims, otherwise it will overextend its own will and develop stubbornness. After the child's mother, the practical teacher plays the greatest role in the formation of its moral and rational character. Rather than engaging the child in the practices it hopes one day to participate in, the teacher must work closely with it 'to determine at what age and at what degree of the child's ability this reasoning must begin' ([Holst] 1791: 26).

Here we begin to glimpse the positive implications of Holst's critique of modern education. True education requires that each child has a single teacher who can nurture its unique capacities and freely guide it towards the principles of the sciences. The first task for such a teacher is to discern the indelible mark left by the child's 'first educators', which they can build on but never entirely eradicate. Only then can the teacher provide appropriate instructions that gradually invite the student to grasp the reasons behind the content they learn. The first error thus does not so much concern the *system* of education as its *application* ([Holst] 1791: 30–1). Holst notes that even Rousseau, who has done

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so much to improve the state of education, fails to apply his theory of children's learning in practice, for he instructs teachers to reason with children about matters for which their moral and rational concepts are not yet fully formed. Rousseau's 'heated imagination' – his over-excitement with the idea that children are agents in the learning process – caused him to conclude that teachers must discourse with their students ([Holst] 1791: 29). To avoid the first error, Holst argues that the teacher must balance reasoning with instruction; they must assist the child to orient itself in the world by setting activities that promote physical movement and invoke the child's curiosity, gradually inviting it into the realm of reason giving and receiving.

Holst's critique of Rousseau is ultimately directed at Basedow and Campe. She claims that the pioneers of the Philanthropin, swept away by Rousseau's enthusiasm, recommend teachers to reason which children before their minds are fully formed.[22] Not only does this error betray a misunderstanding of how children learn, but it also reveals a danger that comes with the scholar's vocation:

> It is to be hoped, however, that this common fate of men who have acquired a certain reputation in public life would make them all the more careful to make their proposals with a precision that would not be easily misinterpreted; and to examine their system all the more carefully beforehand, especially when it has so much to do with the welfare of humankind, and to consider whether it agrees with human nature and with its relation to the present state of circumstances! ([Holst] 1791: 32–3)

Holst cautions her readers from blindly accepting the elevated position Basedow and Campe have claimed for themselves as authorities in German pedagogy. The perfection of modern education, she contends, does not lie in current pedagogical practice but in an uncharted future.

The second error targets the Philanthropinists' claim that lessons should be light and engaging. The title for the section links the error with two of the four vices resulting from modern education: 'The hallmarks of our modern educated virtue are superficial knowledge and a spirit of frivolity, produced by teaching too many sciences at once, dressed up in a light, playful garb and deprived of pedagogical means' ([Holst] 1791: 34). Holst's primary target in the section is Campe's major pedagogical work, *Fatherly Advice For My Daughter* (1789), in which he claims that education should not begin with an abstract system of words but with the concrete human vocation 'to make oneself and others happy

[22] Holst's critique of Basedow seems to be based on the *Method Book* (1770), in which he positions his theory of education in relation to Rousseau. Yet Basedow in fact had developed the core of his pedagogical theory by 1749, well before Rousseau's *Emile* appeared in 1762. See Louden (2020: 2).

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through the proper training and application of all one's powers and abilities in the circle in which and for which providence has caused him to be born' (Campe 1796 [1789]: 8). The theory of children's learning developed by Locke and Rousseau, for Campe, entails that the teacher should abandon rote learning and disciplined revision and instead present the material through verse, story, and image. To disseminate this method across the schools and institutes of Germany, Campe produced the *Small Children's Library*, a series of educational resources which purport to offer everything a child requires for its training in 'morality, religion, political science, psychology, criticism, and the fine arts' ([Holst] 1791: 38–9). While Holst agrees that education should engage the child's mind, she argues that colourful and captivating material in fact dulls its natural capacities. It leads the child to think that it has mastered a science when in fact it has merely skimmed its surface.

In response to Campe's pedagogical material, Holst (1791: 34) claims that education 'cannot bring forth or create genius; but it can contribute immeasurably to its development or to its suppression'. As Campe rightly notes, the task of a non-coercive education is to enable a child's genius to emerge on its own course. Yet Holst (1791: 38–9) contends that Campe's *Small Children's Library* stands in 'contrast with the principles laid down by this scholar'. The mass production of colourful children's books ensures that modern education 'leads her pupils to the spring too early; they drink as much as they can, and yet, because they are not yet up to this strong drink, they are initially intoxicated and now believe they are equal to it' ([Holst] 1791: 37). The superficial knowledge they produce is more dangerous than not knowing at all, for it leads children to believe that they *do* know, leaving them unable to judge the limits of their knowledge ([Holst] 1791: 43).

Holst's alternative is extremely demanding. Her claim is that standardized pedagogical material cannot solve the problems of German education, for it fails to acknowledge the unique constitution of each child. Campe's elementary books cannot replace a practical educator who has mastered the sciences and is able to introduce their principles at the right moment in the student's unique developmental path. A teacher who 'does not have a keen spirit of observation and wise judgment, wrought by much experience, believes he can use without hesitation what such famous theoretical educators write' ([Holst] 1791: 39). Parents also succumb to the promise of Campe's learning books and defer their responsibility as first educators. Yet a teacher who grasps the principles of the sciences understands that 'the child's gaze tends to turn to those objects that are of most interest to it', and thus encourages the child to follow the 'zest' of its own mind ([Holst] 1791: 45). By carefully guiding the child's interest, the practical teacher creates an environment in which learning is self-directed.

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The goal is to 'arouse the child's passion' such that it learns naturally rather than by coercion ([Holst] 1791: 46). To avoid the 'surface knowledge' of modern pedagogy, which teaches children to accept the information presented in elementary books on trust, the 'true culture of the mind' consists in an internal, self-developed unity. 'The less I can withhold my applause from almost everything Herr Campe presents in this fine treatise', Holst (1791: 38) states, 'the more I have to lament that he goes completely against his own rules in the application'.

Holst (1791: 47) extends her diagnosis of the superficial knowledge produced by modern education in the third chapter of the book: 'The Conceit [i.e., the spirit of frivolity] is further generated by the use of reading books for children'. She begins by estimating that about half the adult population are now affected by this conceit, which comes from the surface knowledge and false confidence produced by superficial learning. Holst's (1791: 49–50) claim is that social vices like overconfidence and triviality begin from an early age. Echoing Locke, she argues that while most adults consider children as 'dolls, with which they can play for a short time according to their liking', children are in fact watching their movements and passions and are constantly forming concepts ([Holst] 1791: 52). Capacities are not fully formed, awaiting to mechanically unfold, but are mere potentialities that require appropriate nurture and care. History, for instance, is not simply a matter of learning facts. It is a matter of 'developing the human intellectual powers' by acquiring an appreciation for the different stages in the development of culture ([Holst] 1791: 57).

Holst (1791: 58) acknowledges that Campe designed his children's library by following 'the otherwise correct conclusion that the development of the mind of a single child takes without danger the same course taken by the whole of humankind'. This is once more to say that the error lies not in his theory of children's development but in its application. Holst recommends that teachers introduce subjects that are appropriate for a given developmental stage. The practical teacher must explain concepts and introduce new ideas 'according to the nature of the abilities and capacities of his pupil, and the particular situation in which he is brought up' ([Holst] 1791: 63). Yet this simply 'cannot take place' with the use of standardized reading books for children with 'such different characters, abilities, and ages'. In contrast to the frivolous students produced by modern education, uneducated people make no pretence to knowledge, for they are aware, like Socrates, that they know nothing ([Holst] 1791: 70). It is the half-enlightened person, ignorant of the principles that unite the sciences, who believes that everything was given to them in their education ([Holst] 1791: 71).

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Holst (1791: 74) examines the final error in the fourth chapter of the book: 'The early maturation of virtue, which is enervating to mind and body, arises from an overstimulated imagination, which has its source in the prevailing sensuality and luxury present in children's literature'. The primary target of the chapter is 'education through enthusiasm', which reflects the overbearing sensuality found in the writings of the Philanthropinists. One of the symptoms Holst (1791: 75) examines – an issue widely discussed in the pedagogical literature of the time – is 'a tendency toward onanism and immorality that now prevails among the young'. Holst draws on the public concern with the 'devastating vice' of masturbation to elucidate the vital but often misused role of the imagination in education. According to her philosophical anthropology, the vices of imagination have less to do with the young than with the conditions of their upbringing, which can produce imbalances in a child's constitution such as an overheated imagination. 'If the plant ripens too hastily', Holst (1791: 76) explains, 'the fault is certainly that of the gardener'. It was his responsibility to 'shelter it from the burning sun, to water it when it was parched, to prune its leaves and wild shoots, to give the soil . . . the right mixture so that the plant entrusted to him would develop in due time so that he could hand it over to the owner of the garden for useful service'. The implication of Holst's critique is clear: 'if our boys and girls mature before the time of nature, the blame is mainly on their education' ([Holst] 1791: 77).

Louden (2021: 87) notes that Holst's description of the Philanthropinists as 'enthusiasts' is unusual, for Basedow and his colleagues prioritized rational self-legislation over sentimentalism and clearly aligned themselves with the Enlightenment. Her charge points back to the critique of Rousseau in her examination of the first error: in their enthusiasm to apply the insights of the new pedagogy, the Philanthropinists overemphasize sensuous learning and downplay the use of age-appropriate rules, and thus misjudge the 'economy of the human body' ([Holst] 1791: 80). Their stimulating teaching methods awaken the child's drives too early, creating a poor environment for the child's capacities to develop on their natural course. Holst's (1791: 81) point is that each power must develop in balance with the others at the proper time, for 'an overstretched imagination is master of the passions'. Thus the teacher, as gardener of the child's budding capacities, should not blindly follow a generic programme of learning but should instead attend to the unique balance of the child's bodily powers. Holst agrees with Basedow and Campe that human development 'begins with sensation', yet she claims that the developmental process consists in ideas mediating and directing the drives, leading to their perfection ([Holst] 1791: 81). Enthusiasm 'is over-excitement, and according to the eternal laws of nature, over-excitement must always be followed by exhaustion' ([Holst] 1791: 88). Holst (1791: 89) warns

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that 'enthusiasm, as a means to educate the youth, is always very dangerous in the application', for it tends to produce self-centred adults.

In the final pages of the book, Holst recommends several texts that point to an alternative path for German pedagogy. One is Moses Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours*, in which Mendelssohn laments the prevalence of enthusiasm in modern culture. On Holst's (1791: 91) reading, Mendelssohn attributes this worrying trend to the neglect of speculative philosophy and the 'desire to see and touch what cannot fall into our senses'. She chastises Basedow's *Elementary Work*, which attempts to represent the characteristics of God through images, and instead commends Wieland's *Agathon*, which reveals the pitfalls of enthusiasm and a heated imagination, as an alternative to Rousseau's romantic conception of nature. For Holst, Mendelssohn and Wieland show that the task of education is to empower young people to navigate the world, to make wise decisions that promote their happiness and the happiness of others:

> Shall we rearrange our civic constitution, eradicate luxury altogether, return to the simple needs of nature? Or educate our youth in such a way that they can meet the temptations that sensuality and the prevailing luxury offer to them everywhere without succumbing? ([Holst] 1791: 96)

Holst's questions anticipate a line of inquiry she will later develop in *On the Vocation of Woman*. The Roussouian conception of nature taken up by Basedow and Campe, she suggests, is a fantasy of learned men, which leads one to chase an imagined past rather than to undertake the more arduous task of refining civilization into a realm of freedom. While the animal fulfils its vocation by following the immediate stimulus of the senses, the sensuality of the human being is perfected through the cultural refinement of the mind (c.f. Holst 1802: 101/44). True education thus requires a dedicated teacher who can attend to the child's physical and intellectual development, introducing the right amount of sensory input according to their specific needs.

3.3 The Sexless Mind

In contrast to Basedow's *Method Book*, Holst's *Observations* is not a systematic work of pedagogy. It is a critique of modern education that attempts to carve out space within the pedagogical community for a future in which the individuality of each child is placed at the fore. In the forward to the book, the editor Johann Gottwerth Müller (1791: Vorrede) promises that Holst's critical remarks will be followed up by an exposition of her own pedagogical model. Unfortunately, a second instalment never came to fruition. Nevertheless, the four errors identified in the book work towards a positive conception of the child's one teacher, a highly educated practitioner who works from firm principles to guide

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the child to the right sources at the appropriate moment in its intellectual and physical development.

Holst's diagnosis of the errors of modern education is not overtly gendered. As Sotiropoulos (2004: 100) notes, Holst is not primarily concerned with the restrictions Rousseau and his followers placed on women's education but with the 'fallacies in their theoretical assumptions about how young children learn'. It is vital to note, however, that at 'no point does she differentiate between the sexes' and that she consistently emphasises 'a common humanity before gender identity' (Fronius 2007: 208). In this final section, I identify the implications of Holst's argument for the complementarian basis of modern pedagogy; implications she will make explicit in *On the Vocation of Woman*.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the representation of women's education in popular journals was generally positive and early pedagogical literature actively encouraged women to engage in popular debates. Journals such as *The Patriot* (1724–26) targeted a female audience and promoted an education guided by the principles of morality and reason. Gottsched's journal *The Judicious Female Critics*, founded in 1725, encouraged women to learn foreign languages, to write letters on pressing moral and social matters, and to thoughtfully educate their children. Yet in the second half of the century, pedagogy became increasingly tailored to narrowly prescribed gender roles. In *Emile*, for instance, Rousseau argued that a woman's education must be circumscribed to her subordinate position in nature as man's helper. Foregrounding Kant's and Fichte's complementarianism, Rousseau argues that the perfection of woman must occur *through* man:

> Thus the whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet—these are the duties of women at all times, and they ought to be taught from childhood. (Rousseau 1979 [1762]: 365)

Like several women writers in the late eighteenth century, Holst did not reject Rousseau's pedagogical theory wholesale. As we have already seen, her work as a teacher was partly inspired by his empiricist account of a child's intellectual development. Yet Holst contends that at the very moment he restricts women's learning on physiological grounds, Rousseau contradicts his own theory in its application. If it is true that children are born free, and that their education must be tailored to their natural capacities, then a child's teacher cannot predict his or her needs in advance. It takes extensive time both inside and outside the classroom for a teacher to discern the child's natural capacities by allowing them to emerge and develop on their own course ([Holst] 1791: 35). Holst's

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critique of modern education seeks to show that German pedagogy has reproduced the Rousseauian contradiction. While the modern pedagogues of Germany claim that education should be non-coercive – aligned to the immanent course of children's learning – they nevertheless set a general, gender-specific curriculum that prejudges the student's needs and thereby undermines the student's agency in the learning process.

For Holst, the contradiction between the modern theory of education and its application to German schooling is particularly evident in the gendered account of learning advanced by Basedow and Campe, which circumscribes the general human vocation to physiologically determined ends. In his *Method Book*, for instance, Basedow includes a section 'On the Different Education of Sons and Daughters', in which he draws extensively from Rousseau (fifteen pages of direct quotations) to remind the parents of Germany that because women are 'under the dominion' of men, the education of girls should teach them 'how to bear' their subordinate vocation (Basedow 1880 [1770]: 159).[23] Basedow's strict qualification does not entail that women should remain uneducated. He had planned to open a school for girls next to the Philanthropin named the Catherineum (after Catherine the Great of Russia), which did not eventuate for financial reasons, and his own daughter Emilie was a star pupil at the Philanthropin (see Louden 2020: 5, 187–8). Nevertheless, Basedow's written work and pedagogical activities, which had an enormous effect on German society, reinforced a complementarian view of gender that prescribes different curricula to boys and girls.

While she was deeply aware of Basedow's influence on German pedagogy, Holst's diagnosis of the errors of modern education suggests that she was primarily concerned with Campe's position in *Fatherly Advice For My Daughter*. After leaving the Philanthropin in 1777, Campe moved to Hamburg to establish a new pilot school based on a family model, and it is possible that his influence stifled Holst's efforts to fundraise for a new academy for girls in the city. Like Basedow, Campe grounds the scope of education in the human vocation to perfect one's naturally given capacities. Yet going beyond his former colleague, Campe claimed that the education of girls is sharply qualified by a *second* vocation determined by their reproductive capacities. Girls must be taught to recognize that they 'have a twofold vocation, one *general* and one *particular*, one as *human being* and one as *woman*' (Campe

[23] In Basedow's defence, Louden (2020: 119–20) identifies a discrepancy between the restrictions he places on women's education in his writings and the more liberal approach taken in his pedagogical practice. Holst, however, is working only with Basedow's *Method Book*, which had an enormous impact on German pedagogy in the late eighteenth century. See also Louden (2021: 80–1).

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1796 [1789]: 5). A woman's desire for higher learning is thus a symptom of her *mis*education. A good mother fosters natural modesty in her daughter, which makes her content with her subordinate duties.

Holst does not openly attack Campe's distinction between a woman's two vocations. Nevertheless, her argument removes the importance of gender from the pedagogical context. The task of the teacher, she contends, is to awaken in the child the 'ideal of perfection' such that it does not know 'the great gulf between action and feeling' ([Holst] 1791: 60). In Holst's analysis, the ideal of perfection is without qualification; every human being is called to perfect the capacities given to them by nature. While the practical teacher must be acquainted with what nature has made of each child – the singular balance of physical and intellectual capacities – Holst rejects the idea that physiology conditions perfection. Education should enable children to 'survey their own capabilities and estimate their own perfection', and thus to pursue the ideal of humanity as far as they can ([Holst] 1791: 61). With perfection as the guiding ideal, the human vocation is shared equally, irrespective of sex.

Holst's *Observations* is a bold and unprecedented text. In the first work by a woman to publicly criticize the Philanthropinist movement, Holst positions herself as a scholar who has a stake in the debate concerning modern education in Germany. Müller, the editor of her book, anticipated the radical implications of her critique. While he explains to the reader why Holst's credentials place her in good stead to evaluate the state of German pedagogy, he is nevertheless careful to distance himself from her substantive claims:

> If she is right, then the public owes her a debt of gratitude, that she has so candidly shared her observations and doubts. If she is wrong, then the builders and guardians of the new system of education gain all the more strength from it, if they can make her errors evident. In both cases she deserves to be heard, and all the more so, for, as a practical educator, she is entitled to a voice. (Müller 1791: Vorrede)

Müller justifies his decision to publish Holst's book by appealing to the progress of pedagogical science. He clearly recognized that the emphasis Holst placed on the student's humanity before socially codified roles stages a radical shift in the field. By demonstrating how the ideal of perfection governs the developmental path of every human being, Holst rejects the gendered qualifications Basedow and Campe placed on the human vocation and contends that there should be no pre-determined constraints on a child's learning. If men and women are equal as far as the constitution of the mind is concerned, then the same moral and intellectual virtues should guide the formation of both sexes – even if nature has called them to different forms of life.

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Despite Müller's reservations, Holst's *Observations* was positively received in the academic community. One reviewer declared that the author of *Observations* displays 'much insight' into the field of modern pedagogy and the practical demands teaching (Anonymous 1792: 545). The author does not simply explicate the 'merits of the method of education developed by Locke, Rousseau, Basedow, and their successors', the reviewer notes, but also demonstrates that 'in the various applications of their theory, especially in regard to the means of education (the writings and libraries for children, which they supply in large quantities), they violate the essential foundations of the philosophy of education'. The reviewer was clearly surprized to find that such a scholarly work was written by a woman. In a backhanded endorsement of Holst's abilities, he notes that there is nothing in 'the flow of ideas, the tone, and the language' to suggest a woman's hand. When Johann Beckmann (1806: 549) decided to reveal the authorship of *Observations* without Holst's direct permission, he explains that she deserves 'the privilege of being called by her own name', for the depth of her knowledge and the force of her argument proves her standing as a 'scholar [Gelehrte]' in the field of pedagogy. *Observations* appears to have withstood the test of time. Several years after her death, one of Holst's obituarists states that her book was 'received with the greatest approval' and that, when her authorship was revealed by Beckmann in 1806, there was a great stir in the scholarly community (Anonymous 1846: 318).

4 Enlightened Femininity, Contested

The expansion of journals in the eighteenth century opened new opportunities for women to publish letters, poetry, and topical essays. In print, women were able to develop independent voices and discuss the social institutions and prevailing ideas that shaped the course of their lives. Monika Nenon (2020: 23–4) counts 754 new journals established in the German states between 1741 and 1765, and a staggering 2,191 new journals between 1766 and 1791. Yet Ulrike Weckel (1998: 30) notes that despite the rapid growth of print media, at the end of the century only fourteen journals were edited by women. Women writers often required a male champion to introduce their work, especially in the popular journals dominated by contributions from men. A typical example can be found in the April 1791 edition of *New German Mercury*, a popular pro-Enlightenment journal, where the editor, Christoph Wieland, introduces an anonymous letter by a woman concerning happiness in marriage. Anticipating that some readers may object to a woman asserting such forthright views in public, Wieland (in [Berlepsch] 1791: 63 n) informs the journal's readers that the letter had been left in a drawer for ten years and was only published because

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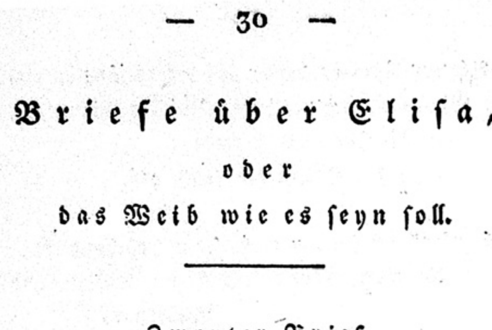

— 30 —

Briefe über Elisa,
oder
das Weib wie es seyn soll.

Zweyter Brief.

In meinem lezten Briefe versprach ich Dir mein Urtheil über Elisa, in Hinsicht der Ausführung des Plans der Verfasserin mitzutheilen. Ich eile mein Wort auszulösen; und weder die 5te Auflage, noch die Uebersezung in drey Sprachen, die mit so vielem Pomp, neuerlich wieder in den Zeitungen verkündet sind, haben irgend eine Aenderung in meinem Urtheil hervorgebracht.

Wenn Du einen neuen Beytrag, zur praktischen Moral für Frauenzimmer in diesem Buche zu finden wähntest, so hat Dich der Schein getäuscht. Du findest auch nicht ein

Figure 2 First page of Holst's second letter on *Elisa*

of his editorial intervention. The truth of his anecdote aside, Wieland found it necessary to reassure potential readers that while the letter is written by a woman, its publication came about through the agency of a man.

Holst kept abreast of conversations in learned journals concerning the social conditions that affect the happiness of women in marriage. In 1799 and 1800, she published a series of four letters in August Lindemann's *Musarion: A Monthly Journal for Ladies* (see Figure 2), signed off with her own name.[24] Her letters examine the role of a woman's education in securing the conditions for her happiness by undertaking a critical analysis of the anonymously

[24] Holst (1800b: 341) indicates her intention to write a fifth and final letter, but the letter seems not to have appeared.

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authored novel, *Elisa, or Woman as She Ought to Be* (1795). The novel is addressed to 'all German girls and women', signalling the author's intention to write in the tradition of Sophie von la Roche's *The History of Lady Sophia Sternheim* (1771), which fashioned educational teachings for young women in a captivating plot. The author of *Elisa* was later revealed to be Karoline von Wobeser, the eldest daughter of the prominent royal official Christian Ludwig von Rebeur. Lydia Schieth (1990: 114) speculates that Wobeser chose to publish the novel anonymously due to the fact that she was 'initially anxious not to appear by name as the inventor of an exemplary female character'. Whatever anxieties she may have had were unfounded, however, as *Elisa* was immediately successful. English and French translations became available within the year and by 1798 a third German edition had hit the shelves (and a seventh in 1805). The novel idealizes the suffering, virtuous woman who upholds her duty in the face of significant opposition – a common trope in eighteenth century novels. Yet in contrast to the conservative ideal of the disciplined woman, for whom self-sacrifice is a natural characteristic, *Elisa* appeals to the romantic sensibility of Rousseau's *Julie, or The New Héloïse* (1761) and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), where sacrifice is a part of the protagonist's self-realization. It thus weaves the Enlightenment vision of composed femininity together with the romantic search of self-fulfilment, recommending self-denial 'as a conscious *social* strategy for women' (Fronius 2007: 26).

Wobeser was a champion of women's education and wrote publicly against the restrictions placed on women's social opportunities. In the Preface to the second edition of *Elisa*, she argues that the elementary books targeted at women do more harm than good. 'Half-enlightenment is always harmful', she writes, 'but why should women always be half-enlightened?' ([Wobeser] 1798: xi). The conviction motivating her work is that women, because they are denied access to higher learning, lack the resources to grasp hold of a firm principle to form the foundation of a happy life. Her novel seeks to fill the vacuum left by a woman's discontinued education.

Holst's letters are addressed to an unnamed friend who, like many young German women, is captivated by the vision of feminine virtue depicted in *Elisa*. She begins by assuring her friend that, like the novel's author, she desires true virtue and the education of women 'with all my soul' (Holst 1799a: 355). 'For many years', Holst writes, 'I have contributed my share, both in terms of my own life and as an educator, with honest zeal and constant effort'. Yet Holst informs her friend that despite the author's noble intentions, the novel misrepresents the role of education in promoting a woman's happiness and the happiness of those around her. Instead, it endorses an angelic ideal by which

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a woman's education elevates her above the concrete institutions of society. The problem with Wobeser's ideal of the self-effacing woman is that the daily injustices experienced by women remain unchallenged. Holst proposes an alternative vision of education in which women are empowered to realize their happiness *within* society, which requires a confrontation with unjust social conventions.

In this section, I examine Holst's critique of Wobeser's treatment of women's education in *Elisa*, which marks an important step from her first book on education to her mature critique of the Enlightenment in *On the Vocation of Woman*. I suggest that in the letters, Holst expands her account of a child's development into a broader moral psychology according to which adherence to familial duties is necessary but not sufficient for virtue. She warns against Wobeser's rationalist conception of happiness, which endorses a Stoic commitment to duty in the face of injustice, and defends a holistic conception of rationality that includes a duty to oneself – to one's immanent happiness – and the expectation of respect from others. Holst's moral psychology, I suggest, lays the foundation for her argument in *On the Vocation of Woman*, for it entails that education empowers women to be moral equals in marriage. I begin in Section 4.1 by introducing several precursors to Wobeser's novel that enabled women to explore different narratives of self-realization. I then examine Holst's critique of Elisa's angelic self-composure in Section 4.2, identifying her proposal of an alternative education that prepares a woman for a virtuous life. I conclude in Section 4.3 with Holst's comparison of Wobeser's novel and Rousseau's *Julie*, in which happiness is achieved not *despite* but *by means of* social duties.

4.1 Woman and the Novel

The eighteenth century is often described as the age of letter writing (Brant 2006; Fritz 2020). As postal routes expanded across the globe, letters offered an intimate genre to explore the inner contours of the self and its place within a rapidly changing society, sitting somewhere between the private and public spheres. While the sanctions on education made it difficult for women to participate in academic debates, the publication of collected letters opened new opportunities for women writers and readers to examine the impact of those debates on their lived experience. Following Rousseau's *Julie, or The New Héloïse* (1761), the epistolatory novel became one of the most widely discussed genres in literary journals, allowing women to imaginatively explore alternative visions of femininity. Given the historical importance of Rousseau's *Julie* to both Wobeser's *Elisa* and Holst's critique, it will be helpful to rehearse a few of its major themes.

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Rousseau's *Julie* was a staggering literary success across Europe. It was available in German almost immediately and attracted widespread attention from the German scholarly community (Nenon 2018: 239). Women readers were especially interested in the heroine's learned education, which stood in stark contrast the restricted education Rousseau prescribed to Sophie in *Emile*. The 'new Héloïse' is a reference to the medieval Héloïse, an erudite woman renowned for her scholarly prowess and passionate exchange of letters with her teacher Abélard. After marrying in secret, Héloïse is forced to renounce Abélard by her unyielding uncle. In Rousseau's rendering, the story takes place in the home of an aristocratic family in Vevey, a tranquil village on Lake Geneva. The youthful Julie d'Étange falls in love with her tutor, known simply as Saint-Preux, who awakens in her a passion for music, literature, and the arts. Julie's letters to Saint-Preux disclose a sensitive and expressive woman who relates to her desire as a natural power, driving her to revolt against the conventions of morality. Through the exchange of letters, Julie and Saint-Preux envisage a new form of relationship that is not decided by economic or social considerations, as was the accepted practice in middle- and upper-class society, but by mutual feeling and the pursuit of their own happiness. Their love drives them outside of society to a bond that resembles the state of nature Rousseau describes in the *Second Discourse*, in which members are not bound by convention and contract but by feeling and sympathy.

Yet a state of nature bound by romantic love cannot last in a society governed by countervailing rules and regulations. Julie's father opposes their illicit relationship and Saint-Preux is forced to leave Vevey for the Parisian metropolis. When Julie's mother discovers her daughter's ongoing correspondence with Saint-Preux, she becomes distraught, falls ill, and dies. Julie feels responsible for her mother's death and, in her grief, consents to marry Baron von Wolmar, an older man chosen by her father. Her resignation does not, however, signal the end of her passion. Julie undergoes a profound transformation as she learns to weave her sympathetic character together with her familial duties. At their wedding, she is struck by a new sense of self in her role as wife. In contrast to the impossible romantic bond with Saint-Preux, Julie's marriage with Wolmar forms the ideal human community, a balance of freedom and order, play and learning, abundance and economy, which several characters contrast with the decadence of Parisian courts and salons. Under Julie's oversight, Wolmar's country estate in Clemens is governed by virtue and sympathy rather than reason and merit. When Saint-Preux returns, Julie has become a conscientious wife and mother, devoted to her husband and to the education of her children. While his presence in Clemens prompts an inner struggle, Julie remains true to her husband. She attempts to integrate Saint-Preux into her new

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world by employing him as tutor to her children. Nevertheless, she begins to experience moments of languor and depression. The novel ends with her premature death. After rescuing one of her children from the lake, Julie catches a severe cold and dies a few days later.

The reception of Rousseau's *Julie* in the German states reflects the ongoing debate between proponents of Enlightenment and those associated with Storm and Stress, a proto-Romantic movement in German literature and music that celebrated individual subjectivity and the free expression of emotion (Guthke 1958: 386). Critics from both sides of the struggle praised the book for offering an important exploration of the relation between social progress and human passion. Yet they differed in how they interpreted Julie's transformation and subsequent fate. Those aligned with the Enlightenment, such as Mendelssohn and Lessing, criticized Rousseau's depiction of social and cultural decline. Mendelssohn (1761: 258) was particularly scornful of the novel's sentimental language and argued that the narrative is 'uneven', the dialogue 'dragging', and that its 'passions overshoot the reader's imagination'. Julie's sacrifice is unconvincing, he claimed, for she becomes 'more than a virtuous lady; she becomes an angel' (Mendelssohn 1761: 272). Lessing (1879 [1767]: 253) agreed that the novel's composition is piecemeal. Citing Mendelssohn, he disparaged the inconsistency of Julie's transformation: 'At first she is a weak and even a seductive maiden, then at last she becomes a woman who surpasses all one could dream of as a model of virtue'. For those associated with Storm and Stress, Rousseau spoke to a new generation that sought to combine the ideals of Enlightenment with feeling and passion. Goethe (1882 [1811]: 154) praised Rousseau's portrait of Julie's bond with Saint-Preux, which depicts a 'beautiful union . . . harmoniously formed by nature'. For Goethe, *Julie* enlivens the reader to a depth of human feeling that revolts against social convention in the name of nature, revealing that happiness requires violent and often frustrated passion. Jacobi (1809: 144) celebrated Rousseau's portrayal of Julie's transformation for displaying how 'the human heart is such a weak thing, but also how without it no bliss in life would be possible'.

The tensions in *Julie* inspired a series of epistolary novels by women writers in Germany. La Roche's *The History of Lady Sophia Sternheim* (1771) continues Rousseau's exploration of the way that a woman's education forms the basis for an inner happiness that cannot be undermined by unjust external events. Like Julie, Sophie Sternheim receives a learned education in her family home that evenly balances knowledge and virtue, merit and sympathy, including the study of music, philosophy, history, and languages. After the death of her parents, Sophie enters courtly life where she must learn to deal with practices that are contrary to her ideals. When slighted in marriage by Lord Derby, she

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learns to rely on her own resources as a governess and teacher. While she ends in a conventional marriage with Lord Seymour, the novel focuses on Sophie's ability to navigate the conflict between her subjective desire for self-fulfilment and the objective social order, which she encounters outside the confines of marriage. The emphasis placed on her broad knowledge and cultivated intellect place La Roche's Sophie at odds with the Sophie of Rousseau's *Emile*, whose education prepares her for a life of devoted service to her husband, but not with Rousseau's Julie, for whom knowledge and virtue form the foundation for the happiness of an individual in society. La Roche emphasizes the fact that virtue and knowledge are inherently valuable for all individuals in society, regardless of their gender.

In the tradition of *Julie* and *The History of Lady Sophia Sternheim*, Wobeser's *Elisa* presents the actions of an educated woman whose learned knowledge and training in virtue enables her to pursue a happy life despite adverse external circumstances. Yet her novel is more closely aligned to the Stoic ideal of self-restraint advanced by Enlighteners such as Mendelsohn and Kant, according to which happiness demands the triumph of duty over the sentimental desire for self-fulfilment. Before her father's premature death, Elisa is given a thorough education that aligns both her mind and heart to virtue. Despite her fiery imagination and sentimental heart, her education has established a rational and moral sense which keeps her firmly grounded on the path of virtue. She falls in love with Hermann von Birkenstein, an upright gentleman who is almost equal to her love. Wherever Elisa goes she is admired; even Birkenstein is overawed by her perfection and is resigned to the fact that he cannot merit her affection. Yet at the very moment Elisa declares her attachment to Birkenstein, her mother introduces her to another man, Graf von Wallenheim, and informs her that he is to be her husband. Elisa's sister Caroline has fallen in love with Wallenheim's cousin, who is in the custody of Wallenheim's father. The father will only consent to the marriage of his nephew if his recalcitrant son marries the sister. To secure Caroline's happiness, Elisa's mother demands that she relinquish her attachment to Birkenstein and accept the overlooked Wallenheim. Elisa protests that this dark and withdrawn man has little prospect to make her happy. 'O, my mother!', she cries, 'With reason, the Creator gave me the right to choose my own happiness. By obeying you, I resist the first commandment of nature, which calls me to happiness!' ([Wobeser] 1798: 68). Bidding her to cease this 'romantic chatter', Elisa's mother informs her that all joys are given 'from the hand of virtue' and that happiness stems from a soul 'imprinted with virtue and innocence'. The first commandment is thus obedience to family, and happiness will follow. Sacrificing her own fulfilment for the sake of her sister, Elisa yields to her mother's request:

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> Duty demands all this from me? I obey! Never, never shall my love triumph over virtue. I will learn to bear suffering. Separated from you, Hermann, I will weep for all my days; but I will say to myself: I fulfilled my mother's commandment; I never scattered displeasure on her days. ([Wobeser] 1798: 70)

Even before their marriage, Wallenheim proves to be a selfish and impulsive man with little regard for the demands of virtue or the happiness of others. On their wedding day, Elisa places aside all hope for material happiness, all desire for recognition in marriage, and commits herself entirely to her marital duties. In a telling episode, Elisa discovers a letter from Wallenheim's mistress, requesting financial aid to settle her growing debts. Knowing that her husband is unable to assist his lover and fearing that he may be forced to borrow the money at great interest, Elisa sends her own jewels to remedy the situation. Refusing to confront those who do her an injustice, Elisa displays a faultless commitment to her duty as wife and mother. By seeking happiness in the fulfilment of duty alone, Elisa is presented as the perfect unity of sense and sensibility. Following the form of Rousseau's *Julie*, Elisa dies prematurely at the close of the novel. Yet in contrast to the ambivalence of Julie's demise, Elisa dies content in the unshakable knowledge that she has lived her days as a virtuous daughter, a faithful wife, and a dedicated mother.

4.2 The Immanent Scope of Happiness

In her letters on *Elisa*, Holst explores the role of education in securing a woman's happiness. In the preface to the second edition of the novel, Wobeser (1798: x) explains that she crafted the narrative in such a way 'that pure morality alone, and the principles of positive religion, should form the basis of Elisa's actions'. The circumstances are so hostile to her desires that Elisa's satisfaction is underscored by nothing other than the knowledge that she has acted virtuously, which no earthly power can take away from her. The aim of the novel, Wobeser explains, is 'to show that peace in death arises primarily from the conviction of having done one's duty on earth; beyond that, a curtain is drawn, which we humans will probably never lift'. She concludes the preface as follows:

> So I hand over *Elisa* once again in the same form to my fellow citizens. As a woman, I wish to see true virtue and high education of the mind spread more and more among my sex, from which we are moving away more and more through a false direction of the mind. If noble men make it their duty to educate women in the ways of virtue by their behaviour, every noble woman will thank them! And the author of *Elisa* will consign her book to oblivion, if she may hope that the system which Elisa followed is imprinted in the hearts of most of our women. ([Wobeser] 1798: x)

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Wobeser informs her readers that her intention in writing *Elisa* was to offer a system to guide German women through the twists and turns of life in a society that is often antagonistic the happiness of women. In her letters, Holst (1799a: 346) evaluates the novel against Wobeser's goal of personifying the 'purest moral principle of unselfishness'. She introduces the novel as 'a series of actions by . . . a woman who combines a fully devoted, benevolent heart with an educated mind'. This woman 'never works for herself, only for the happiness of others, and combines the most perfect renunciations with the warmest feelings . . . that answer to reason alone'.

While pure motives might seem attractive to one committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment, Holst claims that to act 'by reason alone' is a dangerous ideal for a woman. She begins her analysis by inviting her friend to note that the novel's depiction of rationality is divorced from Elisa's lived experience, including her attachment to family and friends, the way she is treated in marriage, and her longing for earthly happiness. In the attempt to portray unselfishness as a 'pure principle', Holst (1799a: 346) informs her friend, Elisa is depicted as 'an angel, not a human'. In many scenes throughout the novel, Elisa's dedication to duty evokes such amazement in the reader that 'in our excitement we so gladly forget that we cannot step out of the circle of humanity, that we can never become angels, and that therefore such an ideal is not for us earth dwellers'. To take up Elisa's system, Holst (1799a: 347) writes, you 'must completely give up rational self-love, which wise and good nature certainly did not give you in vain'. Holst's (1799a: 348) point is that if a woman takes Elisa as her model, she 'must become supernatural in order to be truly perfect'. Angels do not enter reciprocal relationships with humans. For instance, when Wallenheim acknowledges Elisa's virtue, he is not prompted to reform his behaviour by treating his wife with respect. Rather, he is overawed by her nobility and filled with despair at his own baseness. Elisa floats over the unjust institutions that determine the shape of women's lives by embodying an unshakable independence. She is the ideal of composure (*Gelassenheit*) – the highest virtue of the Enlightenment – as she readjusts her comportment to meet every situation she encounters. Alan Menhennet (1986: 254) notes that *Elisa* is an exemplary work of Enlightenment literature, for it 'prefers acceptance of the God-ordained state of things to the assertion of the individual will in rebellion against it'. Wulf Köpke (1979: 97) accounts for the popularity of *Elisa* among readers alighted with the Enlightenment as resulting from the novel's capacity to evoke 'the sense of passive devotion in idealized form'. In the face of gross mistreatment, Elisa 'remains (always) gentle, tolerant, passive, devoted, accommodating'.

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Holst concedes that Wobeser's depiction of Elisa's profound sense of duty and steadfast composure in the face of serious setbacks is a moving fable. Yet as 'a contribution to morality', she writes, 'it is misguided' (Holst 1799a: 352). The problem with Wobeser's depiction of Elisa's angelic self-sacrifice, Holst (1799b: 32) explains, is that it casts 'the vocation of woman [as] a superhuman ideal'. She frames her objection in pragmatic terms: 'I see the thing for what it is, and therefore stick to my conviction that *pure air*, *pure morality*, *pure reason*, and *pure virtue* are not for the frail inhabitants of this earth' (Holst 1799a: 350). Yet Holst's pragmatism turns on a deeper moral psychology according to which rational self-love demands recognition in society. By casting aside material satisfaction for the sake of duty, Elisa fails to grasp that happiness is grounded in the immanent conditions of a life. Moreover, her renunciation does nothing to challenge the wrongs committed against her by her family and her spouse. For Holst, Wobeser's call for heroic self-sacrifice dangerously shifts the reader's attention from Elisa's concrete relation to others to a transcendent realm of virtue that inhibits a woman's capacity to make informed decisions that promote her happiness and the happiness of those who depend on her. When Elisa's mother forbids her from marrying Hermann, for instance, Elisa concedes that her 'unspeakable love' can be overcome for such an 'unconditioned duty' (Holst 1799b: 40). Since she is a 'supernatural being who can check her desire if she chooses to', Holst (1799b: 41) explains, 'she could easily bring herself to do it'. Yet 'for we daughters of the earth, we must not let it come to that, we must watch over the emergence of our passion'.

Holst appeals to her friend – and to the readers of Lindemann's *Musarion* – to consider whether *Elisa* truly remedies the half-enlightenment of women identified in the preface to the novel. The reader is told that Elisa's father ensured that she grew up with a 'good heart', a 'sublime, loving soul', and a strong sense of virtue, such that his untimely death does not undermine her prospects for happiness (Holst 1799b: 32). Moreover, the reader is told that Elisa's knowledge and moral training is so great that, when she enters society, her admirers remark at her philosophical mind and scholarly training. Yet the nature of this education – what it consists of and how it transforms a woman's hope for earthly happiness – is not mentioned in the novel. The portrait of Elisa suggests that a woman's education somehow elevates her *above* the complex demands of modern life.

To check her friend's admiration of *Elisa*, Holst sketches an alternative programme of education that she will develop at length in *On the Vocation of Woman*. A woman's education, she writes, should not merely consist of the positive religion expounded in novels but should also include 'the physical and moral history of humanity; the history of the earth and its revolutions, which

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show us how everything works towards development and perfection; but above all the history of humanity, its perfection, connected with the thirst for knowledge; its desires and wishes' (Holst 1799a: 356). By gaining a firm grasp of human history, women come to understand that their impact on human civilization is equal to that of men, if not more significant. Given that men and women co-create the social order, women 'require a high degree of moral conviction in the important matters that affect our peace and happiness' (Holst 1799a: 358).

In addition to the study of history, Holst (1799b: 31–2) recommends a wide range of eighteenth-century literature, including Henry Fielding's *Amelia*, Madame de Beaumont's *Letters of Madame du Montier*, Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, Campe's *Fatherly Advice for My Daughter*, Meiners' *History of the Female Sex*, Mauvillon's *Husband and Wife*, and Pockels' *Characteristics of the Female Sex*. Holst by no means endorses the vision of femininity presented in these books; indeed, she attacks several of them in *On the Vocation of Woman*. Yet she explains that they nevertheless have a great deal to teach a woman. Like the study of history, they show her that the health and well-being of society depend inextricably on the moral formation of women. Such books aid a woman to see that Wobeser's superhuman depiction of Elisa is not only unrealistic but also dangerous, for it encourages women to spurn the self-love that a proper attunement to one's rationality demands, removing their desire from the immanent order of society to a realm of fulfilment that transcends it.

4.3 Realizing Self-Love through Social Duty

While Holst recommends a wide range of literature to her friend, the only text she examines at length is Rousseau's *Julie* (see Holst 1799b: 35f.). In Rousseau's novel, Julie receives an extensive education that includes music, drawing, and foreign languages. In her letters to Saint-Preux and her cousin Clare, Julie displays a refined intellect that enables her to feel and express her own sentiments, demonstrating how a learned education empowers a woman not only to follow her heart but also to realize her desire for happiness through the principles of virtue and humanity. Like many women writers of her time, Holst identified strongly with Julie's desire for recognition, which outstrips the complementarian ideal of marriage defended by her male peers – including Rousseau.[25] While Julie discovers a natural and self-fulfilling relationship with Saint-Preux that can only be realized outside the bounds of social convention, it

[25] Holst's ambivalent relation to Rousseau echoes Staël's (1788: 32–3) critique of Sophie's qualified education and her praise of Julie's independence. In her review of Staël's *Letters on the Works and Character of J.J. Rousseau*, Wollstonecraft (1789: 360) rejects Staël's endorsement of Julie and argues that the novel offers little more than moral platitudes to women. See

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is by sacrificing her attachment and accepting the wise and good Wolmer that she finds a way to realize her desire within the conventions of society. In Julie's words, by reconciling herself to marriage she enters a 'holy union' of passion and duty, 'a new state that was to purify my soul and restore it to all its duties' (Rousseau 1997 [1761]: 292).

Holst (1800a: 213) invites her friend to consider which of the sacrifices 'corresponded to a sublime and noble character': Elisa's or Julie's. In contrast to Mendelssohn's charge that the portrayal of Julie is woefully inconsistent, Holst (1800a: 215) claims that Rousseau masterfully presents the growth of a woman 'as if it were the course of nature, without leap, without *deus ex machina*'. After renouncing her love for Saint-Preux and marrying Wolmer, Julie discovers a faithfulness in marriage that honours her rational self-love. She falters only when she encounters Saint-Preux after their prolonged separation. And even when she feels her passion rekindle, Julie recalls her social duties and checks her desire. 'After a long struggle', Holst (1800a: 216) writes, 'she had to make this sacrifice if she did not want to jeopardize her and her dear friend's [i.e., Saint-Preux's] happiness and the beautiful understanding of a happy family'. Holst (1800a: 214) contends that 'Julie's renunciation of her beloved . . . was indisputably a sacrifice of true filial duty; it was the action of a sublime, powerful soul'.

In comparison to Julie's transformation, Elisa's sacrifice does not promote her happiness or the happiness of her family. It merely secures the conditions for Elisa to play the part of an angel. Elisa, Holst (1800a: 216) recounts, 'is in love with a noble young man, who is completely on a par with her and not entirely without fortune'. Birkenstein is 'the noblest of his sex' and 'the only one capable of making her happy'. Yet in response to her mother's unreasonable request, Elisa denies the fulfilment of her desire and instead accepts a man who does not have the character to make her happy. 'These circumstances were indeed so poorly conceived', Holst (1800a: 217) declares, 'that one cannot understand how the author had no others at her disposal'. Holst (1800a: 220) explains that the sacrifice made by 'the so very enlightened Elisa' was not prescribed by 'her proper duties'. In fact, because 'there were no reasons for Elisa's sacrifice', the educated reader should find her actions morally reprehensible, for 'the whole happiness of her life lay in the balance' (Holst 1800a: 221). Elisa's angelic character renders her completely unsuitable as a model for we human beings, who are unable to spontaneously relocate our desire without undergoing a transformation. 'Nature has connected the desire for happiness too

Trouille (1997: 39–45) for a discussion of the Janus-faced depiction of Rousseau in the writings of eighteenth century women.

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intimately with our being', Holst (1800a: 223) writes, 'so that to follow it is one of our first duties, insofar as it is not fulfilled egoistically, to the detriment of the happiness of our fellow creatures'.

At the core of Holst's moral psychology is rational self-love, a commitment to the duties corresponding to one's own rationality such that one seeks one's material happiness *through* one's duties to oneself and others. On Holst's reading of *Julie*, Rousseau masterfully guides the reader through Julie's youthful passion, which sparks a desire for recognition in the state of nature, to the discovery that 'passionate love [*schwärmerisch Liebe*] is not the most important requirement [in marriage], but rather respect and friendship' (Holst 1800a: 223). Julie's sacrifice was justified by the promise of friendship with a wise and respectful man. Elisa's sacrifice had no such justification. To have a duty to marry *any* man, Holst avows, a woman must at the very least 'be able to respect him'. To marry a man that one cannot respect is to neglect a duty to oneself:

> The whole tone between Elisa and her husband is not as it should be among honoured spouses; it is that of a despotic father against his still uneducated daughter; and Elisa almost always behaves toward her husband in this way, not like a woman who knows her dignity and rights as well as her duties. (Holst 1800b: 528)

In addition to one's duties to others, rational self-love expects others to honour and respect one's dignity and rights. Anticipating the argument she develops in the second chapter of *On the Vocation of Woman*, Holst (1800a: 223) claims that marriage 'is a union which, since it is entered into for life, has the most important influence on our happiness, and therefore must be entered into with the greatest caution'. The only thing we owe to ourselves, Holst (1799a: 359) writes to her friend, is 'a better training of [our] powers and a wise enjoyment of a domestic happiness tested by experience'. Elisa's angelic self-composure means that she does not confront Wallenheim's moral failings or pursue supportive friendships outside of marriage. Viewed as a human being rather than an angel, her sacrifice reveals a passion that is not self-love but self-loathing, for it maligns the appreciation of one's moral worth that underpins rational agency. For Holst, a reader of *Elisa* could only be moved by the protagonist's fate if they shared Wobeser's obsession with purity and had no feeling for women's dignity and rights. The upshot of Holst's moral psychology is that a woman's self-realization should not diminish her sphere of influence to the inner recesses of her heart but rather open her marriage and her household to the equitable conditions of rational self-love, which requires that she confront unjust social conventions that prevent the mutual respect between mother and child or husband and wife. Holst encourages her friend not to esteem Elisa as a model

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of feminine virtue. A reader of Wobeser's novel imbued with a proper feeling for her self-worth should grieve Elisa's pitiable decisions and see that it is not due to her virtue but rather to her misjudgement that Elisa's life has been unhappy. 'Tell me who you marry', Holst (1800a: 224) proclaims, 'and I will tell you who you are'.

Holst concedes that happiness in marriage remains elusive under the present social conditions. In keeping with tradition, Rousseau's new Héloïse meets a tragic end. While Julie offers the portrait of a respected wife, a competent mother, and a discerning housewife, she ultimately fails to reconcile her romantic longing for self-fulfilment with the happiness of fulfilling one's social duties. Her death is followed by a hymn to love, honouring her attempt to integrate duty, virtue, and happiness and lamenting the failure of society to make room for beautiful souls. For Holst, Rousseau's novel does not resign the reader to a distinctly human fate, as Jacobi saw it, but instead opens the tension between romantic longing and social obligation for public discussion. Can we envisage a form of society in which individual happiness can fuse with objective social conditions? For Goethe and Jacobi, Rousseau's *Julie* shows us that frustrated passion is a necessary part of a feeling soul capable of profound happiness. For Mendelssohn and Lessing, the tension indicates that Rousseau failed to see that virtue could master sensibility. Holst settles for neither conclusion. In Julie's fate, she discerns a future reconciliation in which individual happiness will genuinely fuse with concrete social conditions. The key is a reciprocal vision of marriage in which husband and wife each find their happiness in the happiness of the other. Just as women who fail to choose partners worthy of their respect will struggle to find happiness in this life, so men who seek to rule over their wives will find only frustration and sorrow in the home. For Holst, Rousseau's *Julie* encourages both men and women to reflect on the way they inhabit social roles, potentially transforming the complementarian ideal of marriage into an egalitarian community of mutual regard as husbands and wives learn to seek their individual happiness through their union. The means of this transformation, however, are only hinted at in her letters.

5 Before the Judgement Seat of Reason

Holst's literary flair and philosophical insight reach their summit in *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Education* (2023 [1802]). The book was published with the help of Franz August Gottlob Campe, a Hamburg bookseller and nephew of Joachim Heinrich Campe. Impressed by her pioneering work as a teacher, Campe connected Holst with Heinrich Frölich, who had recently established a publishing house in Berlin that specialized in works of

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philosophy. *On the Vocation of Woman* featured alongside several notable authors in the catalogue of Frölich's early publications, including the Schlegel brothers, Goethe, Hoffmann, and La Motte-Fouqué. What sets the book apart is that it is a work of philosophy published under a woman's name, an achievement in the German language preceded only by Dorothea Christiane Erxleben's little-known work, *Rigorous Investigation of the Causes that Obstruct the Female Sex from Study* (2019 [1742]). On the title page, the author is printed as 'Amalia Holst, née von Justi' (see Figure 3). The reference to Holst's maiden name was an authorization of sorts; her father's work was still highly regarded in scholarly circles. Yet in contrast to *Observations*, in which her editor Johann

Ueber die

Bestimmung des Weibes

zur

höhern Geistesbildung

Von

Amalia Holst, geb. von Justi

Berlin, 1802

Bei Heinrich Frölich.

Figure 3 Title page of *On the Vocation of Woman*

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Gottwerth Müller prefaced the book with the reasons he deemed the text worthy of public consideration, Frölich published the book without an editorial note. The text is addressed to the Queen of Prussia, who is praised for providing 'the ideal of feminine greatness and perfection' captured in the book (Holst 1802: v/5).

Stepping back from the specialized field of pedagogy, Holst (1802: 99/43) directly addresses the scholarly community – the 'world of readers', to use Kant's phrase – and presents her case before 'the judgment seat of sound reason'. Her argument centres on a basic provocation. As far as the mind is concerned, men and women are equal bearers of the human vocation 'to develop [one's] faculties, both physical and moral, in beautiful harmony to an ever-higher perfection' (Holst 1802: 2/9). Women should therefore be recognized as intellectual equals and granted unrestricted access to the arts and sciences. While Holst's argument defends the right of women to higher learning, its implications extend beyond education. If women are equal bearers of the human vocation, then to be a scholar – to exercise one's reason in public – is no longer the exclusive task of men. Women are also called to use their reason in public and thus to make their action their own end. The upshot of Holst's argument is a profound anthropological shift from complementarianism to full social equality. Insofar as men and women are equal in their capacity to exercise reason, they are equal with respect to their moral rights and duties.

While Holst anticipates this upshot at several points in the text, she does not push her argument to its radical conclusion. The primary goal of her book is to extend woman's sphere of influence *through* the traditional roles as wife, mother, and housewife. Carol Sotiropoulos (2004) argues that Holst withholds from developing the full scope of her argument for strategic reasons. Appreciating Holst's self-censorship, Sotiropoulos (2004: 103) writes, 'helps us to understand the cultural obstacles faced by any educationist promoting female access to . . . "male" education'. Consider just one case in point. When Holst (1802: 5 n/10 n) mentions Theodor von Hippel's radical claim that women should have full participation in the public sphere, she states that she 'cannot agree with him on this point'. The reasons she gives for holding back, however, are not prescriptive but pragmatic. Such a 'complete upheaval in civil relations would likely give rise to a lot of confusion', she explains, and 'I do not want to be a preacher of revolution'. Yet as Helen Fronius (2007: 210) argues, despite her progressive vision of equality in marriage Holst retained a portion of the conservatism she rejects, and ultimately endorses a hierarchical society. The weight of the patriarchy in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century was so great, according to Fronius, that Holst was unable to acknowledge the radical implications of her own argument.

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There is textual support for both views. My aim in this final section is to present an alternative reading that examines Holst's defence of women's education through the text's performative character. I argue that Holst's daring book – her contribution to a public debate concerning the human vocation – *enacts* a new vision of society based on gender equality. Holst was alive to the fact that many of her readers were socialized into a set of unjust social relations, which meant that they were likely to have objections to her argument that are not entirely responsive to reason. Recognizing that a direct challenge would be insufficient to change beliefs that are materially embedded in social institutions, her primary goal, I suggest, is to unsettle and change her readers' thinking by trailing a range of rhetorical strategies, including genealogy, satire, and critique. With the sensitivity of an experienced teacher, Holst carefully selects these strategies to engage the reader's imagination and to subtly dismantle the social conditions that perpetuate injustice. I thus agree with Sotiropoulos that Holst's aim is pragmatic: she wants to change the behaviour of men and women by revealing their agency in determining how social institutions are perpetuated. Yet in line with Fronius, I suggest that the full implications of her argument extend beyond her stated intentions. To be struck by the force of Holst's book, I argue, is to *feel* the incompleteness of her argument and thus to view the Enlightenment as a profoundly unfinished project.

I begin in Section 5.1 with Holst's critique of arguments made by men to justify the restrictions on women's education. In Section 5.2, I then explore her diagnosis of the fears and failures of men, which prevent them from realizing the full implications of the Enlightenment. I conclude in Section 5.3 by examining the positive dimension of Holst's critique, which transforms conventional gendered roles by expanding woman's sphere of influence within them.

5.1 Unveiling Ideology

On the Vocation of Woman begins with Holst's (1802: 3/10) fiery demand that men justify the right they have presumed for themselves to hold back 'an entire half of humankind, barring them from the source of the sciences and allowing them at most to skim their surface'. Surveying the recent wave of texts on the vocation of woman, Holst (1802: 12/13) observes that male scholars tend to appeal to nature as 'the basis of their claim that women are subordinate to and dependent on men, and to establish that women have inferior mental powers'. Specifically, they call on physiological characteristics including strength and the tautness of nerves to demonstrate that nature has wisely set a complementarity between the sexes. Consider just a few texts that Holst has in mind. In his *Method Book*, Basedow argues that

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> The *male sex* is by nature and through our customs more skilled to work a great deal, to observe experiences from a distance, to learn skills, arts, commerce, or science; as a result, to acquire needs, to hold offices, and to be able to use his superior strength to care for the family. This gives man the decisive rule in the family. . . . *A person of the other sex*, on the other hand, is under his rule; as a result, she must know how to bear this. (Basedow 1880 [1770]: 182).

Basedow calls on nature as an unshakable ground to justify the right of men to rule over women. While human beings, considered as an abstract ideal, are fully equal, nature has bestowed greater strength on one of the sexes. This greater strength supposedly qualifies the abstract, universal equality of human beings with the concrete, social inequality of the sexes. A similar inference can be found in Campe's *Fatherly Advice to My Daughter*:

> the sex to which you belong, according to the present condition of our world, lives in a dependent as well as intellectually and physically weaker state, and, as long as the condition of our world remains the same, necessarily must live. God himself willed—and the entire constitution of human societies on earth, to the extent of our knowledge, is tailored to the fact—that it is not woman but man who should be the head. . . . The entire course of education and life for both sexes in all cultured peoples has been arranged according to this end: the woman is weak, small, delicate, sensitive, timid, small-minded—the man, on the other hand, is strong, firm, bold, persevering, tall, noble and powerful in body, etc. (Campe [1789] 1796: 18–19)

Like Basedow, Campe identifies a combination of natural and social causes for woman's inferior intellectual and physical powers. Yet he is careful to explain that the different characteristics nature has assigned to men and women justify social inequality. Campe reassures the daughters of Germany that their subordinate social status does not mean that they have a lesser influence on society. 'While it sounds incredible on first hearing', he explains, 'the public welfare of the state lies in a large part in your hands', that is, in 'the way in which the female sex fulfils its natural and civil vocation' (Campe 1796 [1789]: 17). Given the profound influence of women on matters of the state, it is essential that they receive an education to enables them to perform their duties well. This education, however, requires carefully defined limits. An unrestricted education would entice a woman to neglect the duties bestowed on her by nature.

Holst does not challenge Campe's claim that there is a physical difference between men and women. Nor does she challenge his claim that this physical difference has implications for the forms of life available to men and women. In the opening paragraphs, she states that woman bears a 'gentle, amiable, and often unrewarded . . . threefold calling' (Holst 1802: 2/9). Yet Holst also states that as a human being, woman is 'a perfectible being fit for developing its

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faculties, both physical and moral'. Notice the subtle distinction Holst makes between a woman's threefold calling (*Beruf*) and her participation in the human vocation (*Bestimmung*). In contrast to Campe's assertion that women bear *two* vocations – a human vocation qualified by a gendered vocation – Holst's anthropology identifies a general, ideal human vocation that is expressed through the particular, non-ideal calling of one's sex. A woman's calling does not limit, restrict, or qualify her humanity; it simply defines the course her perfection will take. As Pia Schmid (1999: 19) rightly notes, Holst's major claim in *On the Vocation of Woman* is that the 'primary goal of education is not the perfect housewife, wife or mother, but perfection as a human being'. Thus, while Holst does not throw off the duties traditionally bestowed on women, she demonstrates how a proper orientation to the human vocation extends a woman's sphere of influence *through* her threefold calling. The endorsement of gendered duties places Holst's argument much closer to conservative feminists such as Angelika Feurer (1789), Madame de Genlis (1801), and Wilhelmine Halberstadt (1808) than to radical feminists such as Olympe de Gouges (2014 [1791]) and Mary Wollstonecraft (2014 [1792]), who explicitly defended the public rights of woman.[26] Yet as we will see, Holst's argument anticipates several conclusions that are much closer to the radical feminists than she admits.

Having distinguished between the universal human vocation and woman's particular calling, Holst (1802: 13) then interrogates an inference found in 'all of the writings that men have written about this matter': that women, by nature, are subordinate to men. Repurposing an argumentative strategy of her earlier book, *Observations*, Holst notes that Rousseau was 'the first to make this error'. In *Emile*, Rousseau (1979 [1762]: 37) claims that the institutions of modern society are unjust to the extent that they coerce the natural freedom of human beings into arbitrary conventions. Yet by calling on nature as the foundation of right, Rousseau endorsed a normative foundation for gender relations according to which 'women, weaker in physical strength, were assigned the second place, giving way and bowing to power' (Holst 1802: 18/15). The inference from nature to right is a performative contradiction, Holst contends, for it employs philosophy – an achievement constitutive of the *break* from nature to culture – to uphold nature's normative superiority over culture. It is baffling for a learned man to equate physical strength with right, Holst (1802: 9/12) observes, for physical strength loses its raw value 'as soon as humanity passes from the state of nature to the state of culture'. In the transition from nature to culture, human

[26] Genlis (1801: I 45–6), for instance, argues that a woman's duties, if they are to be truly fulfilled, require a higher education. Halberstadt (1808) calls for educator-mothers rather than women freed from household duties. For a discussion of conservative feminism in the British context, see Guest (2005: 158–9).

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beings forfeit the individual right to violence and acquire the incomparably superior right to justice.

Holst rejects the idea that the Enlightenment, as it stands, heralds the arrival of a just society. She joins several of her contemporary reformers, including Hippel and Wollstonecraft, to argue that the Enlightenment is profoundly incomplete. A decade before Holst's book, Hippel (1979 [1792]: 93–4) noted that Rousseau's hypothesis of the state of nature conveniently justifies the elevated status of men, who 'would like to convince the other half of humankind that it is not *we* but *nature* who pushed them into the background and subjected their will to ours'. Similarly, Wollstonecraft (2014 [1792]: 22) claimed that Rousseau failed to discern 'whether the evils which his ardent soul turned from indignantly, were the consequence of civilisation or the vestiges of barbarism'. Holst agrees with Hippel and Wollstonecraft that the perfection of humanity requires the triumph of reason over the raw might of nature. The key to the state's perfection is not found in an imagined past, in which men, but not women, were free from coercion. It lies in an uncharted future in which the equality of the sexes becomes the foundation of citizen society.

To disrupt the influence of Rousseau's error on her male peers, Holst develops a counter-narrative according to which the social contract transformed the natural conception of right. In her retelling, the transition to the state of culture did not subvert nature by introducing coercive institutions. Rather, it began the process of nature's completion. The development of culture, Holst explains, was in fact nature's intention all along, which crafted human beings in such a way that they could not remain in violent contagion, lest they destroy themselves completely, but would instead be impelled to 'develop all of their powers' by discovering a value immeasurably higher than physical strength (Holst 1802: 18/15). At the very moment human beings form a social contract, physical strength ceases to be the arbiter of right. The state of culture requires that men and women recognize each other as rational beings, whose thoughts and actions are answerable to reason.

Holst's critique of Rousseau's version of the social contract is radical in its context. What is even more radical, however, is that her critique unearths the ideological function performed by philosophy, which enabled men to justify inequality *despite* the progress of culture. Holst (1802: 19/15) contends that once humanity departed from the state of nature, it did not transform itself into 'philosophical minds as if by a stroke of magic'. The first step towards the state of culture, and even the following steps towards a legal code, was 'merely the work of need'. It was the propensity of human beings to violent contagion that drove them 'to see the advantages that the social contract would grant them', and those in power 'took care of themselves first'. Because a portion of the state

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of nature carried over into the state of culture, women, as the weaker sex, were forced to 'silently withdraw'. When conditions had stabilized, and society began to reflect on its achievement, the philosophers sought to justify the emergent conditions, which worked squarely in their favour. Yet the philosophers failed to acknowledge that human beings 'kept as much of the state of nature as was compatible with their current needs'. It was only as new difficulties arose that the philosophers were confronted with their fallacious reasoning, meaning that the state of culture developed only gradually, 'advancing forward only one step at a time'. In Holst's view, philosophy plays an ambiguous role in the progress of culture, for it brings emergent rights to conscious reflection at the very moment it perpetuates violence by intellectual means. In this sense, the Rousseauian error extends the barbarism of nature into the state of culture:

> If Rousseau and several other writers talk so much about the physical weakness of woman, and attempt to deduce from it her subordinate status, if they claim that nature has granted to her a lower position, they misinterpret this kind mother of all beings. They carry over the natural right of raw, uncultured human beings to the social contract of those who are morally cultured. Thus, they fall into error, upheld by a failure to acknowledge the possibility of the same constitution of thinking in the female sex. (Holst 1802: 20–21/16)

Holst's critique of the Rousseauian error perpetuated by her male peers foreshadows Stanley Cavell's distinction between knowing and acknowledging. For Cavell (1976: 263), to acknowledge another human being is not simply to know that they are a member of *homo sapiens* but also to know *what that knowledge means*; that is, to allow that knowledge to make its claim. Similarly, Holst argues that by inferring the inferiority of woman's intellect from the prevailing social inequality, men cover over the injustice of their elevated position and thus cannot, on pain of contradiction, acknowledge the possibility of a rational constitution in the female sex. As soon as men acknowledge women as equal bearers of reason, 'the entire right of the strong disappears and physical strength is relegated to a subordinate rank, where it belongs'.

Holst's critique of Rousseau exposes the irrational motives of those who engage in philosophy. 'What', Holst (1802: 21/16) dares to ask, 'is the cause of the error that occurs when intelligent men philosophize about human rights and civil relations?' Her answer exposes the unconscious dynamics of power that underpin the self-fashioned rationality of the Enlightenment: 'Only the human inclination that makes one unwilling to share rights that have been enjoyed exclusively for so long' (Holst 1802: 21/16). The philosophical justification of inequality occludes an unconscious desire to uphold convenient social

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conventions. Arguments against the education of women are thus expressions of a distinctly male fear:

> these men were afraid that in the course of their higher education women may think of calling to account the many injustices they have had to endure. For a creature who knows its duties according to their source and in their entirety will of course also acquire knowledge of its rights along the way, for the two cannot be separated from each other. (Holst 1802: 149–150/60)

Holst's argument in this passage outstrips her previously stated intentions, anticipating the critiques of Enlightenment that would shortly follow in the work of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, who unearthed the fear behind the master's drive to maintain the slave's subordinate status. Applied to gender, her argument presages the feminist writings of Mill and Taylor, Hedwig Dohm, and Simone de Beauvoir, who exposed the role of male fear in the production of social inequality. Holst's (1802: 27/18) radical claim is that the male writers who appeal to physiology to deny women an equal role in marriage and the state enjoy an elevated social position due to barbarism rather than right, 'and men would not like to admit this'. The enjoyment taken in their superior social standing keeps men locked in self-deception and blind to the advantages available to them and to others under the conditions of culture.

Holst identifies an additional fear that prevents men from grasping the full implications of the state of culture: the fear that learned femininity will not conform to male desire. To illustrate this fear, she cites Pockels' portrayal of the learned woman:

> A learned woman is a woman who is only in possession of male knowledge and looks down on feminine knowledge with distain and disgust. . . . when such a learned maiden becomes a wife, how miserable is her husband, for she must keep his household in order and yet understands nothing about it. Or if she does understand it, she does not bother with the housework. What help is it to him that she solves algebraic equations if she does not keep track of expenses? (Pockels 1798: II 331; cited in Holst 1802: 117/49–50)

Pockels affirms the view we identified in Kant and Fichte that learnedness is a masculine virtue. When learnedness appears in a woman, she loses her natural modesty. She becomes a 'non-woman', something 'monstrous' in the sight of men (Pockels, cited in Holst 1802: 131/54).

Holst discerns the fear of learned femininity in the work of scholars who claim that learned women will no longer find fulfilment in their domestic duties. Campe, for instance, argued that a woman with intellectual aspirations will destroy a man's hope for domestic happiness:

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> Do you think that her husband will feel compensated for the salty, burnt, or tasteless dishes she serves him, for the disorder in his household, for the squandering of his finances, for the chaotic management of household matters, for the neglect of his laundry, for the spoiling of his children by leaving them to the servants, etc., by erudite talk at the table, by a poem, a novel or the like, penned by his witty wife? (Campe 1796 [1789]: 69)

Exasperated by such ridiculous caricatures of learned women, Holst (1802: 270–271/101) declares that this 'worn-out claim repeated by all writers who have dared to write about the female vocation . . . does not deserve refutation'. Such a claim cannot be attributed to a learned intellect, she claims; it is the expression of a fragile ego that has been slighted by an intelligent woman (see Holst 1802: 12 n/13 n). Instead of providing a refutation, Holst reverses the argument by satirizing the learned *man* who neglects his duties as husband, father, and master of the house. In a series of witty vignettes, Holst depicts a host of learned men – a mathematician, theologian, lawyer, doctor, historian, scientist, poet, and merchant – who pursue learnedness for self-interested reasons and thus fail to fulfil their vocation as human beings. What use is such a man, Holst dares to ask, *to his wife*?

> But if a dutiful woman unites with one of the selfish men depicted here, what will be her fate? What good will it do her that her husband is praised in all the learned journals as a wonder of learnedness if he lacks genuine humanity, if he is always grumpy and glum in his home, if he forgets all the duties of a husband, father, and master of the house? (Holst 1802: 138–139/56)

By inverting Campe's caricature, Holst demonstrates that it is not the idea of a learned *woman* that is contradictory but the idea of *learnedness* when separated from the human vocation to perfect one's capacities and contribute to the wellbeing of the whole. True learnedness, she contends, is inseparable from virtue. A man is never criticized when he gains knowledge that extends beyond his calling. In fact, extensive learning for its own sake is a virtue that gains the esteem of his peers. However, at the very moment a woman expresses interest in learning something that exceeds the minimum that is required to keep conversation at table, prepare her children for their schooling, and maintain an orderly household, men find it necessary to write lengthy books warning other men that extensive study makes a woman less agreeable, yielding, and attentive to his needs and the needs of his family. The preoccupation among male scholars with the threat posed by a learned woman, Holst claims, betrays their complete disinterest for the extensive number of actual women who overlook their duties due to vices that result from ignorance. Why is it, Holst asks with unguarded frustration, that men 'get so much more worked up about the rare exception of

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a pseudo-learned woman who is unfaithful to her vocation, who neglects her duties as a mother, than about the thousands who are unfaithful to their vocation because ignorance and unbridled passions?' (Holst 1802: 237/90). Again, Holst holds back from answering her question lest these men 'be forced to blush'.

5.2 Higher Intellectual Education

Holst claims that the most effective way to improve the status of women – indeed, the most effective way to improve society as such – is to promote the higher intellectual education of women. The implications of her argument, once more, are extremely demanding. Higher intellectual education is not an optional pursuit for a few especially motivated women but a duty for *all* (middle- and upper-class) women. Exactly what higher intellectual education consists in, however, is not explicitly addressed in the text. One of her reviewers impatiently notes that Holst's 'remarks thereon are found scattered freely here and there in the body of the work itself; it is quite tedious to put them together' (Anonymous 1802c: 96). Fortunately, the situation is not quite as bad as the reviewer makes out. Halfway through the first chapter, Holst presents three principles to guide women's higher education.

The first principle concerns the scope of a woman's education. The 'education of women', Holst (1802: 63/31) writes, 'must be entirely free'. To place restrictions on what a woman can learn is to claim authority over another mind, which cannot be substantiated before the judgement seat of reason. The upshot of the first principle is that women 'must be able to explore any field of knowledge to which our genius leads us'. Here we see the gendered implications of Holst's argument in *Observations* laid bare. If there can be no predetermined restrictions on a student's genius, then any other consideration, such as physiology or sex, must come second. Holst acknowledges that there are genuine natural constraints on a student's learning; not all children are equally intelligent or share the same interests. Yet the direction and extent of their learning is determined by internal composition, not external rules. Holst's first principle has clear implications for the use of elementary books in women's education. Novels such as Rousseau's *Julie* and Wobeser's *Elisa* demonstrate the importance of a thorough training for women in the modern world. A woman must learn the history of human endeavours, including those documented in classical texts. She must acquire a fine judgement in the arts, including a feeling for the depths of human expression in poetry in multiple languages. And at the centre of a woman's education stands philosophy, 'the science that teaches us our true conditions in regards to the highest being, ourselves, and the external world' (Holst 1802: 64/31). Philosophy enables a woman to grasp how the

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various domains of knowledge hold together and to feel her significance as an actor on the world stage.

The second principle concerns the proper motivation for a woman's education. The higher intellectual education of women, Holst (1802: 65/31) states, 'must flow from the only true source: humankind's duty to develop all its powers and to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole as an active member'. Holst (1802: 67/32) was alive to the fact that the male scholars criticized learned women for having impure motives – 'the wretched desire to shine' – which drives them to show up their husbands and neglect their families' needs. As we will see later on, several of Holst's reviewers interpret her book as a testament to the dangers of female learning, which tempt a woman to engage in subject matters that are beyond her capacity and calling. Anticipating such a critique, Holst flips the argument on its head by noting that even if learned women are guilty of the vices charged against them, those vices stem not from a natural defect but from the present state of society, which makes it difficult for women to seek higher education for pure motives. The desire to shine arises when the true source of knowledge is withheld. Holst (1802: 65/31) repeats Wobeser's lament about women's half-knowledge in the preface to *Elisa*, stating that 'half-baked and superficial knowledge makes us vain and proud'. It is *true* knowledge, she claims, that 'makes us humble and self-effacing'. Men, by denying women access to higher learning, are thus partly responsible for the vices they discern in learned women.

Yet the crown of a woman's higher intellectual education is not philosophy understood as the *a priori* speculation undertaken by Leibniz or Kant. Rather, it is a branch of philosophy Holst (1802: 196/76) terms 'the philosophy of history'. The philosophy of history, she explains, consists in 'tracing the course that human inclinations and passions have taken at all times' and investigating 'the course of the gradual development of the predispositions and capacities of the human mind from the first stage of culture to its zenith' (Holst 1802: 196/76). The philosophy of history determines the conditions and institutions in which the enlightenment of humanity is advanced and frustrated, empowering women 'to feel their value from a philosophical perspective' (Holst 1802: 197/76). The value of women, understood from a philosophical perspective, includes an appreciation of women's rights, which enables a woman to feel the injustice of her present social standing. By grasping their historical standpoint at the zenith of culture, women discover that their present subordinate status is not a natural condition, for departing from the proverbial state of nature was always nature's intention. A woman who grasps her value from a philosophical perspective will assert that

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> We only want to be free to fulfil the first duty of humankind, which is to train all of one's powers in the most beautiful harmony to the highest perfection. We share this duty equally, and it is as much our responsibility as it is that of men. Before we are man or woman, male or female citizen, husband or wife, we are human. (Holst 1802: 59/29)

The most controversial claim in Holst's argument is not that women should be educated but that they should become learned. There were a handful of writers in eighteenth-century Germany who advocated the higher education of women. In *Rigorous Investigation of the Causes that Obstruct the Female Sex from Study*, for instance, Erxleben criticizes the arguments made by men who claim that women are incapable of achieving learnedness. Drawing from Christian Thomasius and Christian Wolff, she defines learnedness as the combination of complex theoretical learning and practical application: learnedness is the '*rigorous cognition of such necessary and useful truths whereby the understanding and the will are improved and, consequently, the true happiness of the human being is promoted*' (Erxleben 2019 [1742]: 44). While women were expected to merely feel the true and the good, Erxleben claims that they should also gain practical knowledge to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil, so that they can properly fulfil their duties. Hippel (1979 [1792]: 62) went a step further by arguing that by failing to educate women, the state has fallen short of perfection, for it leaves 'half of the resources of mankind unknown, unassessed, and unused'. To remedy this oversight, he proposes that the state should 'open to women its civil chambers, its courts, its lecture halls, commercial establishments, and its places of employment' (Hippel 1979 [1792]: 165). Esther Gad presented a similar argument in 'Some Remarks on Herr Campe's Claims Concerning Female Learnedness' (1996 [1798]), arguing that women should be permitted to pursue higher education. Gad (1996 [1798]: 62) laments the fact that, if a woman becomes learned, she is seen as a threat and all her other virtues are destroyed. The occasional instance of a learned woman, she claims, cannot be a threat to men.

Holst (1802: 96/41) carries the argument a step further by arguing that *all* (middle- and upper-class) women should pursue learnedness, for it is 'the highest duty of all thinking beings'. The human vocation to perfect one's capacities cannot contradict a woman's threefold calling, Holst (1802: 96/41) contends, for 'Nature would have to contradict itself'. If reason and sexuality are both given by nature, a contradiction between them can only arise if contingent social institutions distort their meaning. Of course, a tension may arise if a woman were to dedicate her life exclusively to the pursuit of higher education; if, for instance, she 'were to become a speculative philosopher' (Holst 1802: 94/41). As we see in the celibate lives of Leibniz and Kant, the demands on such a life may

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prevent a woman from enjoying the pleasures of marriage and motherhood, but only if she rose 'so high as to create her own philosophical system' (Holst 1802: 95/41; see [Hippel] 1793: 78–9). Yet rather than leave such lofty peaks of the mind to the jurisdiction of men, Holst dares to ask: *would that be such a bad thing?* Has society lost or gained by the achievements of such men, 'who enriched the world merely through the immortal works they birthed as children of their minds' (Holst 1802: 95/41)? Holst refuses to place a limit on the extent of a woman's learning. If we accept that Leibniz and Kant legitimately expressed their human vocation through lives dedicated to philosophy, then the same must hold for women. The duties of one's sex can, in rare circumstances at least, be placed aside for non-reproductive social ends.

Holst's discussion of the second principle ends on this radical note, which she does not develop any further in the book. In fact, her third principle qualifies the scope of her argument. Higher intellectual education, Holst (1802: 68/32) writes, 'cannot be extended to all individuals of the female sex'. This concession cuts the scope of education along class lines. Holst asserts that the unrestricted educational opportunities defined in the first two principles extend 'only to the upper and middle classes'. The reasons behind her qualification are not immediately clear. At one point Holst states that it would be practically inadvisable to demand the higher intellectual education of the wife of a day labourer or tradesman, for learnedness is beyond the practical remit of the lower classes. But is this not another 'miserable classification and petty exclusion' of which she is so critical (Holst 1802: 117/49)? What grounds could she offer for *this* classification?

Contemporary readers will feel the tension between Holst's defence of women's access to higher education and the restriction she places on class, which seems to replicate the injustice by which men have held back 'an entire half of humankind' by permitting women only to 'skim the surface' of the sciences (Holst 1802: 3/10). Her qualification requires some unpacking, for it seems to undermine her claim that the ideal of humanity is logically prior to other non-ideal determinations. Given that the call for women's higher intellectual education already transgresses the limits of acceptability, one option is to infer that Holst is simply offering a concession to her conservative readers. Here the context of her argument is important. Like other conservative feminists such as Madame de Genlis and Hannah More, Holst aims to extend the educational opportunities available to women against the backdrop of the extensive social unrest instigated by the French Revolution.[27] Their defence of women's education is thoroughly intertwined with their class-based politics, and Holst is no

[27] For instance, a similar tension can be found in More (1794: 18–21), who couches the need for the education of middle-class women within her critique of the supposedly emancipatory politics of the French Revolution.

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exception. It thus seems unlikely that Holst's views on class are merely strategic and separable from her defence of women's education. If they were indeed intended to be strategic, one of the book's early reviews suggests that her strategy was misjudged. After deriding her endorsement of learned women, the reviewer criticizes her condescending remarks about the working classes for being 'so aristocratic, so dismissive and dictatorial towards the most numerous class of people' (Anonymous 1802c: 215).

A systematic reading of Holst's argument suggests that a charitable interpretation of her class-based restriction is difficult to sustain. Consider just a few tensions in her argument. Holst (1802: 117/49) attacks the male writers who place arbitrary restrictions on women's education, yet she endorses the rural institutes created by Friedrich Eberhard von Rochow (Holst 1802: 252/94), which deploy a homogenized curriculum to align working-class children to their 'subordinate purposes' (Holst 1802: 68/32). She decries the need for single middle-class women to make their living through the 'intellectually depressing' industry of handicraft, which merely serves 'the vanity and luxury of others' (Holst 1802: 191–192/74), yet she criticizes the servant class of Hamburg for refusing to work in spinning, 'one of the most useful jobs for the lower classes' (Holst 1802: 255/96). She recommends that teachers offer reasons to their middle-class students for classroom rules, yet she advises educated housewives that their adult servants, who 'have not developed their understanding beyond childhood', should be guided by incentives (Holst 1802: 261/98). The tensions in Holst argument are puzzling given that she clearly does not think that lower-class women are less able. How many Kants and Leibnizs remain 'unnoticed and unused behind the plough', she asks, for they 'lacked the opportunity for education' (Holst 1802: 90–91/40)? At several points in the text, Holst expresses the belief that class society plays a role in nature's plan. For instance, she explains that by distributing gifts unevenly, nature promotes the development of culture (Holst 1802: 68/32). Even luxury, a 'necessary evil', has its place. As a 'consequence of culture', luxury 'employs a thousand hands and minds by indirectly sharpening the powers of invention' (Holst 1802: 223–4/86). Whatever one makes of the tensions in her argument, Holst either does not see or chooses not to pursue the full implications of her claim that higher education must be extended to those who are illegitimately held in a subordinate social position by those in power.

5.3 Extending Woman's Sphere of Influence

Having laid down her claim that humanity precedes the determinations of sex, Holst then considers how a woman's higher intellectual education transforms the traditional duties of wife, mother, and housewife. The higher education of

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woman will not detract from a woman's calling, she writes, but will rather 'refine, establish a principle for, and extend women's sphere of influence' (Holst 1802: 96/41). In the next three chapters of the book, Holst outlines how a higher education transforms each aspect of a woman's calling. A wife is not a helper for her husband but an equal member of a union by which two parties set their own ends together. Motherhood is not simply the instinct for maternal care but also the noble duty of 'first educator'. And a housewife is not a domestic servant but one who spreads enlightened values throughout her home and community. Holst's aim is to demonstrate how a higher intellectual education transforms the natural impulse of desire, nurture, and provision into a constitutive part of human culture. Let us consider each chapter in turn.

In the second chapter, 'Woman Considered as Wife', Holst (1802: 111/47) advances a radical view of marriage according to which 'the rights of men and women in marriage are completely equal'. Her argument interjects into the debate unfolding in popular journals in the 1790s concerning the happiness of women in marriage. Recall the letter appearing in *The German Mercury* that was supposedly left in a drawer until Wieland, the journal's editor, decided to intervene. In the letter, entitled 'Some Characteristics and Principles Necessary for Happiness in Marriage', an unnamed woman (later revealed to be the poet and travel writer Emilie von Berlepsch) examines the effect of misogyny on the happiness of women in marriage:

> In the past, happiness in marriage perhaps required less gentleness and delicacy on the part of men. Women had a limited condition and did not ask for a better one, for a better one was beyond their reckoning. But now that the general refinement and development of ideas and feelings has broken down those barriers to marriage and given women greater needs of heart and mind, mere domination and greater strength can no longer be sufficient to make marriages happy. ([Berlepsch] 1791: 100)

Berlepsch raises what Claudia Honegger (1991: 16) terms 'the problem of modern marriage': how can two individual persons realize distinct selves and find individual happiness without one party subjecting the other to their self-interest? In the modern world, Berlepsch notes, the wife is 'no longer merely the husband's housekeeper and the bearer of his children; she is also the educator, the partner in his relationships, which are often complicated, and, on occasion, must assert her own not unimportant role in social life'. If she is to undertake her new and expanded roles with confidence and decision, she 'must be able to think with freedom and her own insight; that is, she must not be a machine that depends only on her husband's will'. Berlepsch's solution is to call for women's independence (*Selbständigkeit*), which comes about by

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grasping the significance of her duties. How this independence is supposed to come about, however, is unexplored in the letter.

Holst's aim in the second chapter is to reimagine the institution of marriage under the conditions of Enlightenment. She begins by repeating the sharp distinction between nature and culture identified in the first chapter. Marriage is not, she claims, the 'mere animal business of reproduction or the convenience of self-interest' (Holst 1802: 112/48). Rather, it is 'a contract that two equally free beings make with each other to enjoy society in the most intimate and tender bond'. Her egalitarian vision of marriage resonates with the work of several of her contemporaries, who rejected the complementarian ideal upheld by Rousseau. In *Letters on Education*, for instance, Catherine Macaulay (1790: 135) contends that 'the happiness and perfection of the two sexes are so reciprocally dependent on one another that, till both are reformed, there is no expecting excellence in either'. In the third edition of *On Marriage*, Hippel sets out a radical vision according to which the 'ultimate purpose of marriage' cannot be defined by any subordinate end, such as the rearing of children ([Hippel] 1793: 93). The end of marriage, he declares, is 'the closest possible unification of life'. For Holst, the unification involved in marriage can never be formed through hierarchical distinctions or claims to authority. It is established through love alone. 'I can respect and revere my master', Holst (1802: 112/47) writes, 'but I cannot love him in the true sense of the word'. 'Love makes everything equal', she explains, allowing each party to maintain their own personality in a 'true dual unity [Zweieinigkeit]' (Holst 1802: 168/67). Thus, an educated wife is not her husband's servant but his friend. She does not simply maintain lively conversation at the table but knows his financial situation and gives advice on matters of business. Such equality in marriage requires 'intimate friendship, true respect, unbreakable trust, and unfeigned openness' (Holst 1802: 168/67). And not only women but men too will benefit from this change; men will gain an advocate and a partner, women a respectful colleague (Holst 1802: 160/64).

In the third chapter, Holst extends her argument by considering 'The Educated Woman as Mother'. A husband and wife united by love do not simply execute a biological task of reproduction. With infinitely more importance, they 'procreate their kind through wise and purposeful education' (Holst 1802: 111/47). Building on the argument she began in *Observations*, Holst presents an account of child development according to which the early years lay the foundation for all future learning. Given the singular constitution of each child, true education for humanity requires a single, dedicated teacher:

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> This one educator and teacher then knows the creature he wants to educate completely. He has followed his pupil's gradual development, which he has guided and organized from the beginning. He knows precisely all his powers and capacities, and wisely discerns how much of his teaching and education is beneficial for his comprehension at the time and for his future vocation. (Holst 1802: 177–178/69)

The calling of such an educator is intellectually demanding. He requires a mastery of the sciences and sustained time with the child over several years of its development. 'But who is more adept to be the child's first teacher and educator', Holst asks, 'than a loving and educated mother'? The mother 'knows and understands the young plant from its first sprouting and growth' and is thus perfectly positioned to act as the first educator. Yet to do so, she must herself possess 'knowledge that is properly learned and purposefully applied' (Holst 1802: 189–190/74). To properly undertake her calling as first educator, a woman requires a thorough grasp of 'history, geography, natural history, natural science, and philosophy' (Holst 1802: 190/74). 'Without philosophy', Holst writes, 'no single science can be appreciated and taught'. Philosophy 'is the basis of all the others', it 'breathes spirit, life, and a sense of the common good into them all'.

The fourth chapter of *On the Vocation of Woman*, 'The Educated Woman as Housewife', is one of the most intriguing and yet difficult chapters of the book. Holst seeks to show that the sphere of influence appropriate to the educated housewife extends beyond the confines of her immediate family to the workers she employs and the surrounding community in her neighbourhood. The reader is reminded of Wolmar's estate in Clements, where Julie's benevolent administration harmonizes the rationality of culture with the humanity of nature. Like Julie, Holst's portrayal of the educated housewife is marked by composure as she responds to the needs of her family, servants, and nearby estates, producing an atmosphere of virtue rather than reason and sympathy rather than merit. Yet at several points in the chapter Holst's tone becomes overbearing. The educated housewife attends not simply to the needs of her family, preparing for harsh winters and overseeing the careful maintenance of the house, but also to the spiritual well-being of her servants and working-class neighbours. In every interaction with the lower classes, she seeks to encourage good behaviour and redirect the bad.

While she returns to the issue of working-class education, Holst has a larger axe to grind. Her aim is to convince her readers that if the state truly wants to raise the standards of living among the rural working class, the most effective way is not to construct new industrial schools but to promote the education of middle- and upper-class women who can respond to the needs of those in their

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sphere of influence. Just as women are best placed to begin the education of their children, so are they best placed to respond to the local needs of the working class, for 'the small matters of the domestic economy bring us more often together with this class of people' (Holst 1802: 262/98). Holst (1802: 251/94) recommends that members of the working class should receive a 'purposeful education', that is, a formation 'with constant regard for the student's future vocation' (Holst 1802: 256/96). Yet once more, she reproduces the argument she attempts to overthrow. As human beings, members of the working class are called to perfect the capacities given to them by nature. As members of a social order produced through nature's wise intention to promote human culture *through* inequality, working-class people have a subordinate purpose (see Holst 1802: 251/94). It follows that the education of working-class people should be constrained to subject matters that align with this calling.

Holst's argument in *On the Vocation of Woman* is clearly incomplete. Her primary aim is to show that higher education expands the sphere of influence of women as wives, mothers, and housewives. To merely 'smell the beautiful, the noble, and the good would not make us advising wives, active housewives, and careful educators of our children' (Holst 1802: 156–157/63). Nevertheless, the implications of her argument clearly undermine the conventional roles of women. This is especially clear in the final chapter of the book, 'On the Education of Woman in the Unmarried State'. Earlier in the text, Holst (1802: 99/43) noted that the prevailing view of women as the subordinate sex is based on the idea that women exist 'for the sake of men'. This view stems from the assumption that a woman's vocation is decided by what she is to a man: subordinate to his rule and mother of his children. Campe (1796 [1789]: 33), for instance, argued that 'marriage is really the only . . . means [for a woman] to obtain a definite condition, sphere of influence, protection, reputation, and a higher level of freedom and independence'. Holst concludes her book by identifying a sphere of influence for women that is not defined by their relation to men. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, civil unrest, the rising cost of living, and the expansion of a mobile, affluent middle class resulted in an increasing number of women who remained unmarried. Even Basedow (1880 [1770]: 182) acknowledged that some women 'will not be sought in marriage', and thus recommended women's education should provide a set of skills beyond what is required in the home. Yet Basedow's admission does not permit a woman to 'become an expert in this or that art', nor to pursue an independent career. A woman's education, he explains, should help her avoid public scorn for the idleness associated with unmarried women. After exploring several opportunities for unmarried women in the craft industries, Holst recommends that the

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role of educator is most fitting to their human vocation. While the social dangers facing unmarried women are greater than those facing married women, Holst writes, so are the opportunities for the pursuit of higher education. The unmarried woman can give her time and energy to refining her knowledge for the benefit of humanity both as a teacher and a writer. Once more Holst contends that it is not the desire to learn that ails unmarried women but rather the idleness produced by society's inability to create legitimate opportunities for them to share their reflections on the sciences with the world of readers. She calls on women to 'refute the writers who think that the higher education of our mind cannot exist together with the fulfilment of our individual duties' (Holst 1802: 280/104). The best way to 'silence those prejudices' is to demonstrate with one's life that 'much – infinitely much – depends on the education of women' (Holst 1802: 57/28).

6 Conclusion

In 1799, Germaine de Staël made a sobering observation regarding the precarious social position of women writers. 'When a woman publishes a book', Staël (1800 [1799]: 307) observed, 'she makes herself entirely dependent on public opinion, and those who dispense this opinion make her profoundly aware of it'. The letters of women writers from the period, such as those penned by Caroline Michaelis Schlegel-Schelling, express the social pressures on women who transgressed the prohibition against learned women. Holst's decision to publish *On the Vocation of Woman*, and to do so under her own name, shows a striking disregard for public opinion. By attempting to carve out a new vision of social institutions within the fabric of German society, she exposed herself 'to critical censure of both her reputation and her cause' (Sotiropoulos 2004: 101). Clearly Holst was alive to the pressures on women writers. At times she appeals directly to men, claiming that they have 'everything to gain and nothing to lose' from women's higher education (Holst 1802: 147/59). At other times she appeals to women: 'That this is not a beautiful dream will depend solely on you, my women friends' (Holst 1802: 244/92). Holst weaves the scholarly tone of *Observations* together with the sisterly familiarity of her letters to call both the male reading public and her women readers to imagine a new vision of humanity for which the vocation to perfect one's capacities is unqualified by sex.

The reception of *On the Vocation of Woman* shows that despite her apparent disregard for public opinion, Holst was no exception to Staël's observation concerning the dependency of women writers. One reviewer writing for the *Hamburg Correspondent* offers an endorsement of sorts. Yet the manner of his endorsement ultimately reinforces Holst's vulnerability as a woman writer.

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The reviewer describes himself as 'one who knows [Holst] personally' and informs potential readers that the book does not 'merely keep pace with those men – Pockel [*sic*], Meiners, Hippel, Brandes, and Mouvillon – who have written on the present subject', but also 'surpasses them in thoroughness, clarity, and persuasive force' (Anonymous 1802a). The reviewer's aim, however, is not simply to alert readers to Holst's philosophical merit but also to reassure them that her philosophical endeavours did not prevent her from fulfilling her womanly duties as an affectionate wife to her husband and loving mother to her children. It was only 'when she has performed the duties of a loving mother, the duties of a faithful educator of her children, when she has actively attended to her husband's business throughout the day, that she then, in the late evening, gives herself over to the contemplations of such a cultured mind'. The reviewer concludes by congratulating 'the man to whom such a wife was given'.

An anonymous review appearing in the *Imperial Hamburg Newspaper* indicates why the reviewer writing for the *Hamburg Correspondent* found it so important to publicly endorse Holst's character. The reviewer opens with a stunningly uncharitable concession. 'Even if one grants the capacity for higher intellectual education to the female sex', he begins, 'as soon as one considers its calling as wife, housewife, and mother it is impossible to concede that it is destined to rise to the scientific understanding of men' (Anonymous 1802b: 12). Sweeping aside Holst's extended claim that a learned education will empower women to fulfil their threefold calling, the reviewer asserts that a woman who wants to fulfil her duties 'obviously lacks the leisure that is indispensable for the thorough and continued study of the sciences' (Anonymous 1802b: 12). As much as the author 'would like to join the ranks of Meiners, Pockels, Ewald, and others, it is nevertheless obvious that her domestic duties prevented her from obtaining the necessary instruction in the subjects she talks about'. Noting that the author of *On the Vocation of Woman* is clearly driven by a 'desire to charm gallant men by showing off her immature intellect', the reviewer warns Holst to guard herself 'from seeking flattery at the expense of pure truth'. As Holst predicted in her book, the only motivation that many male writers are able to imagine to explain a woman's desire to participate in public debate is an inordinate desire to shine. In Staël's words, the reviewer seeks to make Holst aware that her success depends on the opinion of learned men. Her motivations are deemed suspicious before her argument is considered on its own merits.

In the longest and most in-depth review, appearing in the literary journal *Hamburg and Altona*, a third reviewer announces his intention to adopt a 'middle way between the gallant and the overly ungallant reviewer' (Anonymous 1802c: 96). Granting this 'educated woman' a place among Hamburg's writers, the reviewer deigns to give her arguments a proper hearing

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(Anonymous 1802c: 95). He notes that her book displays ‘wit’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘erudition’. Yet he also discerns ‘a good deal of feminine excitability’ and ‘a lack of deeply penetrating philosophy’. Taking this supposedly balanced line, the reviewer then embarks on an extensive list of Holst’s failings. She is unable to tell readers what she means by ‘higher intellectual education’ (Anonymous 1802c: 96). She mixes key terms that should be held apart, such as learnedness and humanity. And of the many ‘notable women from history’ recorded in the book, she is unable to inform readers whether a single one of them ‘has fulfilled her threefold calling in a humane way’ (Anonymous 1802c: 210).

Among the reviewer’s inventory of Holst’s failings is one especially illuminating case. Holst, he claims, mistakenly conflates education and learnedness. Learnedness is not the general aim of higher education, the reviewer writes, but ‘a trade that nature seems to have ordained to man’ (Anonymous 1802c: 207). To sever the link Holst attempted to establish between education and learnedness, he lists several examples in which a woman’s higher learning prevents her from fulfilling her feminine duties. This allows him to repeat the refrain that ‘a learned woman, in the proper sense of the word, is in herself neither humane, wise, nor amiable’ (Anonymous 1802c: 206). Given the duties that nature has given her, a woman ‘is permitted no time for [learnedness]’ (Anonymous 1802c: 207). If she wants to become a scholar, she must ‘renounce the name of wife and mother, and even more of housewife’. Yet such a renunciation would be impossible, for these names are bestowed on her ‘by nature’. Because feminine charm does not lie in erudition but in natural modesty, it follows that ‘*true learnedness*, which is often diametrically opposed to charm and grace, cannot be present in *charming women*’ (Anonymous 1802c: 359–60).

By reasserting the claim that a learned woman is a contradiction in terms, the reviewer escapes the need to engage with Holst’s redefinition of woman within the traditional institutions of society. Instead, he can simply declare that a learned woman loses her appeal to a man. No man, he writes, ‘will be able to conceive of the woman or girl of his heart, bloody knife in hand, rummaging in the entrails of a cadaver in the anatomical theatre, without the anatomist losing her charm’ (Anonymous 1802c: 206). By reasserting the gendered constraint of learnedness, the reviewer returns Holst to the double bind from which she attempted to break free. Either she must desist from pursuing higher education and accept that a woman cannot legitimately play the learned game, or she must renounce her status as a woman and strip herself of the duties ordained to her by nature. The reviewer’s supposed gallantry undermines the very possibility of Holst’s daring attempt to lay her demand before the judgement seat of reason.

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More than half a century after the publication of *On the Vocation of Woman*, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor made an incisive observation that can help us to frame the difficulties Holst faced at the turn of the nineteenth century. One who wants to criticize a principle that is held almost universally, Mill and Taylor observe, has ‘more difficulty in obtaining a trial, than any other litigants have in getting a verdict’ (Mill 1989 [1869]: 120). What is remarkable about Holst’s work is that despite confronting a principle that was held almost universally, it *did* gain a trial, even if the verdict was unfavourable. The extraordinary circumstances leading up to the publication of *On the Vocation of Woman* – Holst’s unconventional upbringing, her early career as a teacher, her progressive marriage with Dr Johann Ludolf Holst, her experience as headmistress and the founder of three schools for girls, and her scholarly work on pedagogy and women’s literature – provided opportunities for Holst to creatively explore a new vision of the learned woman in her writing, life, and the formation of her students. It is certainly important not to underplay the tensions in her work. Holst criticizes hegemonic conceptions of gender while remaining beholden to traditional categories. She advocates egalitarian reform while restricting the working class to subordinate purposes. And having provided a compelling defence of women’s rights, she pulls back from taking her demand to its conclusion. Yet as I have argued in this study, the performative dimension of Holst’s work – the expression of a new femininity that demands recognition in the public sphere – outstrips its stated intentions, for it begins to rehearse the kind of discourse required if reason is to become truly public.

The tension between Holst’s defence of woman’s full participation in the human vocation and her desire to appear as a reformer rather than a revolutionary leaves the public status of women unresolved in the text. While Hippel presented a vision of society in which women can hold public offices, undertake independent careers, and study at university, Holst (1802: 5 n/10 n) warned that such a radical and sudden shift in society would lead to confusion. Her survey of influential women in the opening chapter demonstrates that revolutions generally do not bode well for women’s rights. Nevertheless, Holst’s defence of women’s education has radical implications for the gendered organization of society. While the prevailing civic relations are profoundly unequal, Holst (1802: 143/58) claims that men and women stand ‘in completely equal relationship to humanity’. This is the stunning achievement of Holst’s work: against the background of natural equality, the normative foundation of civic inequality becomes questionable.

Whatever we make of her refusal to defend a legitimate place for women in the public sphere, Holst did not intend to present an open defence of full social equality. Her single-minded aim was to promote women’s education in the belief that history consists in the perfection of nature as oppression unravels

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and social institutions take rational form. Taken as a whole, Holst's argument offers a telling response to the problem of freedom Kant presented in his essay on Enlightenment. It is 'difficult for any single individual to extricate himself from the ignorance that has become almost nature to him', Kant (1996a [1784]: 8:35–6) writes, for he has 'even grown fond of it and is really unable for the time being to make use of his own understanding'. Given that 'laziness and cowardice' blocks the pursuit of freedom, Kant presents the ideal of an individual who boldly breaks from their self-imposed ignorance and begins to think for himself. For Holst, the Kantian ideal simply cannot be separated from the social conditions that prevent women from participating in the Enlightenment. The 'fourfold fog' – trivialities, trinkets, coercion, and luxury – creates a situation in which women are conditioned to find their moral worth in their subordinate social status. The only path through the fog consists in a higher intellectual education, which 'will refine, establish a principle for, and extend women's sphere of influence' (Holst 1802: 96/41). Holst thus endorses Kant's vision of Enlightenment to the extent that she claims that women should no longer accept what is handed to them as dogma and formula. Yet she does not think that ignorance is entirely self-imposed. To gain a principled understanding of one's social position, and thus to feel the injustices that hold back humankind, one requires a free and unbounded education.

As scholars become increasingly aware of the deliberate exclusion of women in the historiography of German philosophy, it is vital to acknowledge that several women's voices within that history began to dismantle the arguments made by their male peers well before the celebrated critics of the Enlightenment called the entire project into question. As Linda Martin Alcoff (2017: 399) notes, the task of expanding the history of philosophy is not simply to 'add women and stir', as if our historiography simply lacked colour and flair. This would assume that our own vantage is free from oppression, and that history has already taught us its lessons. Unless we allow the voices of women to subvert the mainstream periodization of philosophy, to upend the existing canon, and to broaden the acceptable questions that philosophers are permitted to consider, we end up with an empty pluralism that includes women's voices only on the surface. Holst's work provides a sober reminder that social inequality can be perpetuated in the name of freedom, and thereby challenges the prevailing account of the German Enlightenment as a movement that advanced the universal scope of human freedom. While she was deeply aware that philosophy, when undertaken from positions of power, can serve an ideological function, Holst unearthed a liberating capacity of philosophy in the form of critique. The philosophy of history she envisages bears witness to a profound loss incurred by the

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failure of those in power to acknowledge the possibility of the same constitution of thinking in those who are subordinate to them. Her pedagogical vision prompts us to reconsider how philosophy can empower those who have been denied a voice to feel their value, to name oppression, and to create new forms of discourse that demand recognition in the public sphere.

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