

Week 5: Émilie Du Châtelet (1706 - 1749)

Born into an upper class family, Émilie Du Châtelet's father was a courtier at the court of Louis XIV in Versailles. Married at 19 into an ancient, wealthy family, Du Châtelet soon had three children and accepted all the conventions of the day. By the age of 30, however, she was questioning everything. While her father had begun her education, taking into account her intelligence and interests, she continued it by requesting specialist tutors and entering into discussion and correspondence with the philosophers, scientists and mathematicians of the day.

Du Châtelet had a 15-year relationship with Voltaire. Voltaire lived with them at their family chateau at Cirey. When Voltaire and Du Châtelet ended their relationship she fell in love with a young poet and became pregnant. It was this pregnancy that caused her death from a pulmonary embolism. She anticipated that problems arising with an earlier pregnancy might reappear and this time could threaten her life. She spent her final weeks completing a manuscript she suspected she would not survive to complete otherwise.

Émilie and Voltaire worked together over many years; theirs was a highly intellectual as well as romantic relationship. Due to this collaborative approach her unpublished work ended up in Voltaire's papers. It has only recently been determined that an essay, "On Freedom", included in Voltaire's papers at his death, was probably written by her.

Du Châtelet grounds moral judgement in the principle of non-contradiction, so logic plays a central role in guiding our understanding of what is right to do. This anticipates Kant's (1724 - 1804) own use of a universal logic grounding morality in metaphysics.

From the preface to Du Châtelet's translation of "The Fable of the Bees" by Bernard Mandeville, a treatise on economics and morality:

"I feel the full weight of prejudice that excludes us [women] so universally from the sciences, this being one of the contradictions of the world, which has always astonished

me, as there are great countries whose laws allow us to decide their destiny, but non where we are brought up to think.”

“Let us reflect briefly on why for so many centuries, not one good tragedy, one good poem, one esteemed history, one beautiful painting, one good book of physics, has come from the hands of women. Why do these creatures, whose understanding appears in all things equal to that of men, seem for all that, to be stopped by an invincible force on this side of a barrier, let someone give me some explanation, if there is one. I leave it to naturalists to find a physical explanation, but until that happens, women will be entitled to protest against their education. As for me, I confess that if I were king I would wish to make this scientific experiment. I would reform an abuse that cuts out, so to speak, half of humanity. I would allow women to share in all the rights of humanity, and most of all those of the mind..... This new system of education that I propose would in all respects be beneficial to the human species. Women would be more valuable beings, men would thereby gain a new object of emulation, and our social interchanges which, in refining women’s minds in the past, too often weakened and narrowed them, would now only serve to extend their knowledge. “

“...Chance led me to become acquainted with men of letters. I gained their friendship, and I saw with extreme surprise that they valued this amity. I began to believe that I was a thinking creature. But I only glimpsed this, and the world, the dissipation, for which alone I believed I had been born, carried away all my time and all my soul. I only believed in earnest in my capacity to think at an age when there was still time to become reasonable, but when it was too late to acquire talents..... I hold myself quite fortunate to have renounced in mid-course frivolous things that occupy most women all their lives, and I want to use what time remains to cultivate my soul.”

All quotations are from: *Emilie Du Châtelet: Selected Philosophical And Scientific Writings*, ed. Judith P Zinsser, trans. Isabelle Bour and Judith P. Zinsser. *Volume Introduction*.

WEEK 6 MATERIALS: Sections VI and IX, Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.