



## **illuminating Feminist Voices: A Review of *Gendered Lights of Reason: cultural and educational perspectives* edited by Antonella Cagnolati**

**Iluminando voces feministas: Una reseña de *Gendered  
Lights of Reason: cultural and educational perspectives*  
editado por Antonella Cagnolati**

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Women have long been aware of their own potential, far more so than is often assumed. The idea that the primary distinction between men and women lies in access to opportunities is by no means a recent revelation. For centuries, women have strived to make their voices heard through a myriad of arguments and assertions, many of which have been obscured or forgotten over time. The volume *Gendered Lights of Reason: Cultural and Educational Perspectives*, edited by Antonella Cagnolati, brings together a collection of compelling chapters that examine the lives and works of remarkable women who, despite the severe constraints of their times, rose their voices in favour of the equality of sexes.

This book features contributions from a diverse group of writers, whose varied backgrounds and expertise lend the work a broad thematic scope. Among these noteworthy contributors, Antonella Cagnolati stands out, not only for her thought-provoking chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft's views on women's education but also for her pivotal role in editing and coordinating the volume. The contributors represent a range of disciplines: historians such as María Teresa Ávila Martínez, Aitana Finestrat Martínez, Ricardo Hurtado Simó, and Cagnolati herself; and scholars of literature and translation, including Milagro Martín Clavijo (Italian literature), Leonor Sáez Méndez and Mattia Di Taranto (German literature), and Verónica Pacheco Costa and Sergio Marín Conejo (English literature and translation).

The volume's principal aim is to showcase influential female figures—primarily from the 17th and 18th centuries—and their contributions to a matter that remains highly relevant: gender equality. This interdisciplinary collection provides readers with a nuanced understanding of how these women shaped feminist discourse, making it an invaluable addition to feminist and educational scholarship. Published by Gruppo Editoriale Tab in Rome (2023), the book provides a rare opportunity to explore these contributions across varied contexts as it addresses figures of different origins, making it a notable resource for students, educators, and researchers of feminist studies alike.

The themes explored in the volume include the emergence and assertion of women in literary and intellectual spheres, the channels, such as venues, salons or different media they used to spread their own ideas, the diverse ways in which these ideas were transmitted (in speeches, fiction, poems, letters...), and the enduring legacy of their efforts.

In relation to its structure, there is no clear sequence that relates and orders the different chapters, as there are no sections dividing them by theme or any order criteria. The book spans a wide range of influential figures, from 17<sup>th</sup> century British scientist and writer Margaret Cavendish to 19<sup>th</sup> century German novelist Bettina von Arnim, offering readers a broad yet cohesive look at feminist contributions across time and place.

To avoid undue length, this review focuses on selected chapters that exemplify the book's central theme: the immense potential of women when afforded the same opportunities as men. Some chapters, such as the first and last, do not address this theme directly but explore related topics. For instance, Finestrat's chapter examines the risks associated with sending and receiving correspondence in the 16th century as a woman, while Di Taranto analyses the situation of Jews, particularly Jewesses, in the Romanticism era. Though tangential, these topics enrich the volume by shedding light on the diverse challenges women face under patriarchal systems.

Pacheco Costa's chapter on Judith Sargent Murray stands out as particularly noteworthy. Sargent Murray was undeniably a woman ahead of her time. Denied formal education because of her gender, she educated herself and published her works under a male pseudonym to circumvent societal barriers. Pacheco Costa provides an incisive analysis of Sargent Murray's life, writings, and socio-religious context. Born in colonial North America, Sargent Murray lived through the American War of Independence and argued passionately for women's education as an integral part of the new Republic. She contended that perceived differences in intellect between men and women were not innate but a result of unequal access to education. Employing arguments that might now be seen as problematic—centred on religion and motherhood—she successfully navigated Puritan society to advance her feminist ideals.

Sargent Murray's vision was to maximise the potential of both women and the nation. She believed that educating women would not only benefit them, but the nation as a whole by developing women who will pass knowledge and values to their families and communities, and also by giving them opportunities to improve living conditions and actively participate in the economy. Tragically, her aspirations would not be realised until long after her death. Her story poignantly illustrates the patience and foresight required to sow the seeds of change for a future one may never witness.

Additionally, Hurtado Simó's chapter introduces two remarkable figures that condemned the *Ancien regime* and who sought to make the most vulnerable sectors' voices be heard. The chapter presents the parallel stories of Madame Helvétius and Sophie de Grouchy, both hostess of salons in which the greatest minds of their time dialogued about ideas that were to be the forerunners of human rights. They were also very vocal about their own opinions which, just as

Sargent Murray's, included the importance of education, especially to women who had been deprived from it. Following the ideals of the Enlightenment, they believed education to be essential to develop critical thinking, allowing them to fought ignorance and the old beliefs that perpetuated submission, suffering and a corrupt system.

Moreover, Hurtado Simó introduces key concepts to understand their motives and inspiration. These women, particularly de Grouchy, followed the intellectual movement of the Radical Enlightenment, a subversive movement that sought a profound transformation of all human structures: beliefs, traditions, rules of coexistence and power relations. These women wanted to move beyond simple charity, they sought to engage in actual political action, especially concerning the poorest sector of population, as also did Jacobin women who helped organise banquets in the *Gran Circolo Costituzionale di Bologna*, as stated in Martín-Clavijo's chapter. These women contributed greatly to the celebration of feasts in which poor people would sit next to Jacobins patriots to enjoy a meal together. Moreover, these events included political speeches and, within speakers for the first time, women were included. It was the first time women were participating actively and directly in politics and not just observing from the bench.

However, despite all their efforts to actively participate in political life endorsing equality, education and freedom, Enlightenment values par excellence, when these movements became a reality, women were completely ostracised from their results. All of the rights that both men and women fought to obtain, were only applied to half of them. Always the same half.

Therefore, one may infer an overarching narrative emerging from all of these women's stories. The common denominator is the apparent disparity in how advancements throughout history, particularly those generating benefits to some, have always excluded women. The book examines pivotal historical events and movements—the War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Enlightenment—to reveal how women, though actively involved, were frequently denied the benefits and recognition that such advancements afforded to men. These women must have felt betrayed for the same causes they supported. They were not even considered citizens to begin with, let alone capable and remarkable figures. This exclusion prompts reflection on the countless untold stories of brilliant women buried in historical archives, awaiting rediscovery.

Despite all setbacks, women have historically withstood the tides of patriarchy. They became smarter, smarter enough to navigate the difficulties of being born female in a male-dominated society. They became smarter by educating themselves, like Sargent Murray or Lady Elizabeth Webster in Ávila Martínez's chapter. They became smarter by ciphery and deciphering letters to communicate freely in a time were women, above anything else, were expected to be silent, such as the case of Teresa de Jesús in Finestrat's chapter. They became smarter by developing strategies to make their ideas be heard, as when Karolina von Günderröde used a pseudonym to publish her works as appears in Sáez Méndez's chapter, but also when Sargent Murray wrapped her feminist ideology with conservative reasoning so they would not be rejected in a Puritan society.

Always having to be one step ahead has developed women's intelligence and cunning. So it is understandable how frustrating it must be to be constantly dismissed and overlooked. Rejected before you can even speak out because of not fitting into the mould that society has created for you. Marín Conejo explains in his chapter that Margaret Cavendish challenged this very same social expectations and restrictions with her affirmation of being “native and natural”. In a context where women were considered intellectually inferior to men, Cavendish rejected what was expected of her as a woman and claimed her intellect as something innate and inherent to her feminine being.

Many of these stories have only recently come to light, hidden by a patriarchal narrative that reduced women to roles as mothers, muses, or victims. It is the responsibility of contemporary researchers to continue uncovering these lost voices and restoring their rightful place in history. For those embarking on this journey, *Gendered Lights of Reason* is an excellent starting point. By weaving together voices from various disciplines and cultural contexts, this book provides an indispensable resource for scholars of feminist studies, as well as a refreshing lens through which to examine historical and contemporary contributions to gender discourse.

To conclude this review, I would like to strongly encourage the reader to get their hands on this volume as it offers a rich tapestry of feminist perspectives, recounting the works of already known figures like Cavendish, but also shedding light on other brilliant women whose ideas and works were lost in the archives of time under the oppression of a male-dominated society. This book, with its meticulous research and collaborative effort, not only pays homage to these pioneering women but also serves as a crucial reminder of the ongoing need to amplify marginalized voices in the pursuit of equality. The editors and contributors have created an invaluable resource that bridges history and contemporary feminist discourse, making it an essential read for anyone passionate about uncovering the untold stories that shape our understanding of gender and society.

### **References:**

Cagnolati, Antonella (ed.) (2023). *Gendered lights of reason: Cultural and educational perspectives*. Rome: Gruppo editorial Tab.