In her work, *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks writes that men need a “vision of masculinity where self-esteem and self-love of one’s unique being forms the basis of identity” (2000, p. 70). Today, the dominant form of masculinity is formed in opposition to femininity (Adams & Coltrane, 2005), valorizes “acts and attitudes of independence, aggression, and sexuality” (Reed, 2005, p. 232), and “teaches men that [men’s] sense of self and identity, their reason for being, resides in their capacity to dominate others” (hooks, 2000, p. 70). This patriarchal masculine identity promotes the domination “of the planet, of less powerful men, of women and children” (hooks, 2000, p. 70). To counteract this form of masculinity, hooks calls for the development of an identity which does not insist that men retreat from their maleness in order to become compassionate, humane, loving people. She calls for the development of a vision of “feminist masculinity” in order to challenge male domination of the planet, less powerful men, women, and children. Yet hooks laments that such
a “vision has yet to be made fully clear by feminist thinkers male or female” (2000, p. 70).

In response, below I make the case for the critical reclamation of masculinity by examining a marginalized model in history. Specifically, I assess the life and work of French philosophe Condorcet as a historic example of feminist masculinity as a significant refutation of the deeply seeded belief that masculinity and maleness are synonymous with domination and violence. I make the case that Condorcet’s revolutionary contribution to anti-sexist thought and practice has not been thoroughly recognized. Moreover, I contend that his life and work provide an important link between men and the development of feminist thought, as well as an important historical model of feminist masculinity. Condorcet’s case makes it clear that male feminism is not a contemporary anomaly and that the naturalized domination-based male identity is but one form of masculinity.

**Masculinity and Master Consciousness**

I begin this work by addressing what I understand as the foundation upon which gender inequality is based. Placed in the broader context of feminist theory we should understand patriarchal masculinity as a component of a larger, “complex dominator identity” which environmental philosopher Val Plumwood calls master consciousness or master identity (Plumwood, 1993, p. 5). Starting from a fundamental confidence in the superiority of a select number of individuals who constitute the archetypes for humanity, master identity is “formed in the context of class, race species and gender domination,” and offers a naturalized ideal of humanity based on transcending nature, necessity, and femininity (pp. 5, 23). This worldview of mastery and colonization is legitimated by the master’s logic of dualism.

Dualisms facilitate and justify the domination of one group over another by promoting the appropriation and incorporation of the objectified and subordinated “other” “into the selfhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 41). The dualism male/female, for instance, is part of a number of interlocking dualisms including mind/body, reason/emotion, culture/nature, men/women, among others (Plumwood, p. 43). Patricia Hill Collins similarly identifies this intellectual schema as implying “relations of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender and class oppression” (2009, p. 78). Dualisms “systematically and pervasively” construct one identity as superior and another as necessarily inferior (Plumwood, p. 47). This directly speaks to the previously noted definition of masculinity as being formed through the exclusion or denial of femininity. “Dualism is the process by which contrasting concepts (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (Plumwood, p. 31). Thus, master consciousness, which hooks calls “dominator culture,” pro-
motes the formation of identity around manipulation, control, and violence (hooks, 2004, pp. 115-116). Particularly directed toward men, master consciousness (dominator culture) teaches us that men are “biologically hard-wired” “to dominate and control others,” and that men are naturally predisposed to a predatory social existence (pp. 115-116).

Where poststructuralists emphasize the limits and oppressiveness in iden
tititarian politics, feminist thinkers including Collins (2009), hooks (2004), and Plumwood (1993) argue that social identities are capable of bringing people together and empowering them in social struggles: “Social identities are also sources of empowerment and connection, of stability and continuity, which make it possible to draw on and contribute to wide social sources of meaning and practice” (Plumwood, p. 63). Plumwood acknowledges that social identities such as “woman” and “man” are problematic because of the way in which power relations form them. Yet she contends that such identities “are capable of liberatory or subversive reconstruction without total demolition and abandon
dment” (p. 63). The critical and qualified affirmation of subjugated categories of being “is essential to counter the logic of the master subject, who inferiorises women both individually and culturally, backgrounds and devalues their works, and defines them as peripheries to the master’s centre” (p. 63).

Fundamental to the dismantling of a dualism is the “reconstruction of rela
tionship and identity in terms of a non-hierarchical concept of difference” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 60). One of the specific strategies Plumwood mentions is that of thwarting incorporation or relational definition, a salient aspect of dualistic logic, through reclaiming “positive independent sources of identity and [affirming] resistance.” Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt contend that the concept of hegemonic masculinity acknowledges “the possibility of democratizing gender relations, of abolishing power differentials, not just of reproducing hierarchy” (2010, p. 224). Moreover, the concept recognizes the possibility and the desirability of “a version of masculinity open to equality with women” gaining ascendancy. Positioned within this theoretical context, the concept of feminist masculinity is used to recognize the aspects of masculinity exhibited by men past and present which cohere with a feminist vision of social being. Implicit in this recognition is the position that men and masculinity are catego
gies which remain politically and socially powerful.

In line with Plumwood and Collins’s recognition of the power and signific
ance of social identities, hooks calls for a critical reclamation of masculinity and its liberation from the patriarchal definition. In hooks’s view, the identifi
cation of masculinity and maleness with domination is a misguided reaction to patriarchal masculinity which fails to “separate maleness and manhood from all the identifying traits patriarchy has imposed on the self that has a penis” (2004, p. 115). The problem with men is not their maleness or masculinity. hooks writes that visionary feminism must “restore maleness and masculinity as an ethical biological category divorced from the dominator model” (p. 114). Feminist masculinity rejects patriarchal masculinity and its identification of
maleness with supremacy and domination. Rather, feminist masculinity de-
fines “maleness as a state of being rather than as performance. Male being,
maleness, masculinity must stand for the essential core goodness of the self, of
the human body that has a penis” (p. 115). hooks further contends that we
should replace the assumption that males are born inherently aggressive with
the assumption that they “are born with the inherent will to connect” (p. 117).
Men do not need to forsake maleness. Rather, men need to engage in an active
transformation through resistance to the patriarchal, socially constructed iden-
tity of masculinity, and the creative formation of a masculine identity which is
based on love rather than domination (p. 115). Such a feminist masculine iden-
tity would be based on a partnership model of being that “sees interbeing and
interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings. In the part-
nership model selfhood, whether one is female or male, is always at the core of
one’s identity” (p. 117).

Moreover, developing feminist masculinity requires more than abstract,
theoretical contemplation. Part of envisioning feminist masculinity is reinterpre-
ting the lives and works of male feminists. Collins writes that one method
of undermining the logic of domination responsible for oppression is to ex-
ample and validate marginalized epistemological perspectives that fundamen-
tally reject “dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification,
commodification, and exploitation” (2009, p. 308). Specific to her interest in
Black feminist thought, she writes that bringing to light marginalized black
women’s thought requires “discovering, reinterpreting, and, in many cases,
analyzing for the first time the works of individual U.S. Black women thinkers
who were so extraordinary that they did manage to have their ideas preserved.
In some cases this process involves locating unrecognized and unheralded
works, scattered and long out of print” (Collins, p. 16). Similarly, recognizing
and analyzing feminist masculine models furthers the project of exposing the
ideological agenda inherent in monolithic portrayals of manhood as though
one single model existed. “Just as theories, epistemologies, and facts produced
by any group of individuals represent the standpoints and interests of their
creators, the very definition of who is legitimated to do intellectual work is not
only politically contested, but is changing (Mannheim, 1936; Gramsci, 1971)”
(Collins, p. 19). Turning to history to consider the lives of men who have ex-
hibited a kind of feminist masculine being provides men with what hooks de-
scribes as important “new models of self-assertion that do not require the
construction of an enemy ‘other,’ be it a woman or the symbolic feminine, for
them to define themselves against” (2004, p.114). As I will show, Condorcet’s
life and work provide an important alternative model of masculinity to patri-
archal masculinity.

**CONDORCET**

On 17 September 1743, Condorcet was born into nobility and was be-
queathed an ancient family name (Baker, 1976, p. vii). He would go on to be-
come a class-traitor by becoming France’s “first figure of standing” to become an outright republican (McLean, 1994, pp. 20-21; Williams, 2004). Condorcet was “[f]iercely protected by his mother” and “remained exclusively under her influence for the first nine years of his life” (Williams, 2004, p. 10). Williams writes that Condorcet looked back on those years “with great affection.” He was given a Jesuit education as a child only to become more fiercely critical of traditional, organized religion than Voltaire (McLean, 1994). Indeed, it was Condorcet’s anonymously published anti-clerical work, Letters of a Theologian (1774) which initiated Condorcet’s life-long commitment to political life and social reform (Baker, 1976).

Years after establishing himself as a mathematical genius in the French intellectual world, Condorcet began what would become a life-ending foray into France’s revolutionary politics. In 1789 Condorcet was elected to the municipality of Paris, and participating in writing France’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Three years later he was elected to the new Legislative Assembly and became president of the assembly the following year. When the Legislative Assembly gave way to the National Convention, Condorcet, who identified with the Girondins, secured a spot in the new government. But Condorcet’s opposition to the violent extremism of the Jacobins soon imperiled his life. When Condorcet spoke out against the Constitution proposed by Robespierre and the Jacobins, his arrest was called for on charges of conspiracy. Condorcet went into hiding fearing that he would share the fate of his guillotined associates. During this time he authored both his best-known work, Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind (posthumously published in 1795), and a letter to his young daughter, Eliza. He was eventually arrested, and found dead in his cell two days later, March 29th 1794 (Baker, 1976; McLean, 1994).

While aspects of Condorcet’s contribution to the field of mathematics, the 18th-century notion of progress, and the French revolution are known among some scholars, his contributions to anti-sexist thought and practice and his example of feminist masculinity have not been widely recognized. If Condorcet is known among scholars of European history, he is almost nonexistent to everyday men globally. Why does this matter? As I will argue below, Condorcet, as a man, puts forward a very different kind of masculinity than the prevailing patriarchal masculinity most men know today as masculinity “as such.” Condorcet’s calls for equality among men and women were so daring that his works seem more likely to have been written during the 1970s than the 1790s. At a time when writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and other intellectuals were debating whether or not women deserved to be thoroughly educated, Condorcet made the then radical suggestion that women be given the right to vote and participate in their own governance. He even asserted that the main differences between men and women were a product of social conditioning, not innate capacities. Perhaps most importantly, Condorcet’s political and public pronouncements were accompanied by the practical application of such
views and ideals in his personal life. In my view, it is imperative that legacy of men like Condorcet be given greater attention so that men may acquaint themselves an unheralded, empathy-driven, women-respecting model of masculinity.

CONDORCET’S PUBLIC PRONOUNCEMENTS ON WOMEN’S UNEQUAL STATUS

Condorcet rejected as unfounded any notion of male intellectual superiority and argued that the only solution to women’s unjust treatment was securing of their right to participate in the political process. Condorcet’s first radical statement in support of women’s rights came in 1787, a year after his marriage to Sophie de Grouchy. In the second letter of “Letters from a Freeman of New Haven,” Condorcet argued that if all men were entitled to equal treatment on the premise that they are sentient beings who are “capable of reason and moral ideas,” that is, natural rights, “then women should have precisely the same rights” (Condorcet, 1994, p. 298). Condorcet charged that “no true republic has ever yet existed” since “never in any so-called free constitution have women had the right of citizenship.” He specifically criticized laws that disallowed women’s eligibility for “public functions.” The only people who should be excluded from public offices are “those people who had been tried and found guilty of certain crimes and those in domestic service.” He declared that “no law should exclude women from any post.” In what may have been his boldest and least popular political statement on behalf of women, Condorcet goes so far as to declare that women have the right to refuse to pay taxes levied by parliaments due to their being robbed of political representation. This statement alone places Condorcet firmly in the earliest feminist canon, and sets him apart from the majority of men of his day. As we will see below, Condorcet’s uncommon position on women in society was premised on a disbelief in men’s superiority over women.

Two years before Mary Wollstonecraft published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Condorcet wrote On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship (1790). Published on July 3, the work criticized “philosophers and legislators” among others for violating “the principle of equality of rights in calmly depriving half of the human race of the right of taking part in the formation of laws” (1976, p. 97). The work “aroused debates in the journals, the clubs and in the ‘Cercle social’” (Aulard cited in Brookes, 1980, p. 338). Taking aim at even his fellow philosophers, Condorcet disparaged them all for failing to realize the hypocrisy of invoking the principle of equality to garner rights for a small group of men, while ignoring the plight of “half the human race” (1976, pp. 97-98). He blamed “custom” for making not only men but also women numb to the injustice of violating natural rights. Condorcet again argued that women are equally entitled to the rights of men based on the fact that they, too, “are sentient beings, capable of acquiring moral ideas and of reasoning concerning these ideas.” The “rights of man” were firmly grounded in the principle that
men are in fact sentient beings capable of such thought and reasoning. So Condorcet reasoned that it made no sense to exclude one sex from this equation: “Either no individual of the human species has any true rights, or all have the same. And he who votes against the rights of another, of whatever religion, color, or sex, has thereby abjured his own.” This statement immediately speaks to a rejection of patriarchal thought’s formation of masculine identity through dualistic exclusions and othering.

In order to appreciate the uniqueness and poignancy of Condorcet’s work on women, we must contrast his view of women with the dominant thinking and discourse among his intellectual contemporaries, some of whom were his friends and mentors. Roy Porter writes that the “philosophes did not generally commit themselves to the general emancipation of women as men’s equals” (2001, pp. 45-46). According to Barbara Brookes, French philosophers including Montesquieu, Diderot, and d’Alembert “were tentative in their claims” and “did not present a coherent sustained argument to counter the prevailing ideas of woman’s assumed biological, and therefore social, inferiority” (1980, p. 297).

One reason the Enlightenment’s leading thinkers within and outside France were absolutely silent on women’s enfranchisement is precisely their belief that women were in fact biologically inferior to men. In particular, enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, Kant, and Rousseau upheld longstanding patriarchal beliefs that women were fundamentally inferior to men. Joan B. Landes writes that Montesquieu actively encouraged “the domestication of women” and that his ideas were implemented during and after the French Revolution: “Indeed, the new symbolic order of nineteenth-century bourgeois society was predicated on the silencing of public women” (1988, p. 38). This is apparent in Montesquieu’s renowned work, The Spirit of Laws, published in 1748. In its seventh volume, Montesquieu explicitly states that it is “contrary to reason and nature that women should reign in families, as was customary among the Egyptians” (2002, p. 108). His conclusion is based on the premise that women’s “natural weakness does not permit them to have the pre-eminence” necessary for the job. Whereas Condorcet views inequality as the bane of any society, including sex-based subjugation, Montesquieu explains that an overabundance of equality is harmful to the state. “The principle of democracy is corrupted not only when the spirit of equality is extinct,” he writes, “but likewise when they fall into a spirit of extreme equality, and when each citizen would fain be upon a level with those whom he has chosen to command him” (p. 109). Writing very much from the mainstream of 18th-century intellectual thought, Montesquieu expressly defended the patriarchal world order. Too much equality would likely reduce respect for government leaders, old age, parents, while “deference to husbands will be likewise thrown off, and submission to masters.” Speaking directly to the patriarchal thought model which continues to inform the prevailing form of masculinity today, Montesquieu warns that equality threatens male domination: “Wives, children, slaves will shake off all subjection. No longer will there be any such thing as manners, order, or virtue.”
Perhaps influenced by the views of men like Montesquieu, both Kant and Rousseau also proffered outright misogynistic views of women. In his 1764 work, *Observations on Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant rebukes calls for equal education for women, pointing to the female sex’s natural inclination toward “all that is beautiful, elegant, and decorated” (1995, p. 581). Kant also warns that if women are educated like men they run the risk of destroying “the merits that are proper to her sex.” According to Kant, Providence has instilled “kind and benevolent sensations, a fine feeling for propriety, and a compassionate soul” in the “fair sex,” in place of principles which he thinks women are “hardly” capable of possessing (p. 583). In *Emile*, written two years prior, Rousseau concludes that women are predisposed to a life of indolent occupation, noting that boys generally like movement and noisy activities while girls are drawn to dolls and pretty things (1995, p. 577). Explaining his recommendation of instilling women with docility, Rousseau writes that such a quality will be needed during her life given that “she will always be in the subjection to a man, or to man’s judgment, and she will never be free to set her own opinion above his” (pp. 578-579). In no uncertain terms, Rousseau joins Montesquieu in advocating the patriarchal subjugation of women.

Such sexist thinking was not limited to outright misogynists. Perhaps most significantly, even so-called pro-women intellectuals such as Paine, Holbach, and Diderot and most of his fellow *Encyclopédistes* perpetuated the sexist interpretations of women upon which patriarchal control of women is based. While generally calling for greater concern for women’s plight in society, these thinkers nevertheless agreed that women were biologically as well as socially disadvantaged to men. For instance, one finds Montesquieu’s understanding of women replicated throughout the *Encyclopedia*, the first volume of which was published in 1751. Recognized as the “chief spokesmen of the *philosophes*” (Schwab, 1995, p. xxiv), the *Encyclopédistes* considered man the peak of human potential against which all else should be compared. In her examination of the depiction of “woman” in the *Encyclopedia*, Terry Dock (1983, p. 72) explains that the *Encyclopédistes* viewed women as necessarily weaker and frailest than men, leading them to believe it was their role to regulate the lives of women.

[Women] is not only classified with the defenseless young and the infirm aged,1 but relegated to the ranks of the mentally inferior where she shares the opprobrium of imbeciles,2 the common herd,3 the gullible and the superstitious,4 and the untutored. (Dock, pp. 83-84)

1 Found in the *Encyclopédie* under the headings of ADVANTAGE, BOUCHES INUTILES, ENNEMI, LOUP, MORAVES.
2 Found in the *Encyclopédie* under the headings of BAT, BATTOLOGIE, BUTUBATA; MELANCHOLIE; MARCOSIENS.
3 Found in the *Encyclopédie* under the headings of IMAGINATION.
4 Found in the *Encyclopédie* under the headings of AMULETE, HERCULE, SABBAT.
In his entries for the *Encyclopedia*, Diderot writes that woman is naturally weak and timid, and that her only recourse is to exert sporadic bursts of authority (Dock, 1983, p. 77). So it is no surprise that he refers to Socrates’ principle that man is best suited to deal with “outdoor” matters while the wife is best suited to tend to “indoor” matters (Dock, p. 137). Elsewhere Diderot naturalizes the subjugation of women in society as a product of nature’s malevolence. The “cruelty” of civil laws in “almost all countries,” he writes, “is at one against women with the cruelty of nature” (Diderot, 1971, pp. 191-193). Diderot, like Aristotle, was informed by the belief that “woman’s sex is nothing less than a defect or an imperfection of nature” (quoted in Dock, p. 10).

Again, we can fully recognize the significance of Condorcet’s work by juxtaposing it with that of thinkers such as Thomas Paine. No stranger to French intellectual circles, Paine is often cited as a forerunner in male profeminist thinking, though some are reticent about such a view. Lynn Hunt writes: “The great proponent of ‘the rights of man,’ Thomas Paine, never even deigned to discuss the rights of women” (2005, p. 565). Rosemarie Zagarii goes even further complaining that while Paine “had argued for the right of all human beings to certain universal privileges,” specific rights such as “the right to own property, to vote, to participate in government” were assumed to exclude women (2005, p. 669). “Typically for his time, Paine did not even consider whether women had rights or what those rights might be.” Kimmel and Mosmiller contend that while Paine failed to advocate women’s enfranchisement he nevertheless “recognized the paralyzing consequences of women’s condition and lent his voice in support of reform at a time when virtually no other radical intellectual raised an eyebrow over any other issue than independence from the British” (1992, p. 57). Thus, Kimmel and Mosmiller include Paine’s “An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex” (1775) in their collection of “pro-feminist” men’s writing (1992).

Yet Paine’s letter merely recapitulates the belief that women are subjugated by their biology as much as by society. Indeed, a close reading of Paine’s only work expressly on the subject of women offers indication as to why he had not been given great consideration to women’s rights: he viewed women as utterly other. While he pities women’s place in society he, nevertheless, believes nature is to blame for their plight. He laments that nature, in “forming beings so susceptible and tender,” was apparently more interested in giving women “charms” than “happiness” (1992, p. 63). Paine writes that women are continually “subjected to ills which are peculiarly their own,” and blames nature for their disadvantaged position: “Over three-quarters of the globe nature has placed them between contempt and misery” (p. 65). While Paine’s concern for women’s well-being is certainly novel, his belief that women are biologically inferior to men merely perpetuates the dualistic logic justifying their subjugation.

Like Paine and Diderot, Holbach, also an *Encyclopedist*, lamented women’s lot in life and complained about society’s role in subjugating them, but never-
theless believed that nature was largely responsible for women’s inferiority. Despite his desire to see women treated more fairly, Holbach adhered to the notion that nature had disadvantaged women by making them infirm and afflicted with sickness for at least one-fourth of the year (Brookes, 1980, p. 311). In volume II of The System of Nature, Holbach writes that one should not be surprised that women have generally abstained from atheism since “their organization renders them fearful; their nervous system undergoes periodical variation.” Not only does their education “dispose them to credulity,” many women have a natural propensity for irrationality:

Those among them who have a sound constitution, who have a well ordered imagination, have occasion for chimeras suitable to occupy their leisure; above all, when the world abandons them, then superstitious devotion, with its attractive ceremonies, becomes either a business or an amusement. (Holbach, 2006, pp. 226-227)

Taken together, these men’s views on women form a coherent thesis: women are biologically predisposed to irrationality. Their silence on the subject of women’s enfranchisement is a consequence of their deep-seeded distrust of women’s intellectual capacity. The reason they said little to nothing on enfranchisement may have been because they believed women lacked complete competency to share with men the responsibilities of full citizenship.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

In contrast, Condorcet argued that male-dominated society, not nature, was principally to blame for women’s failings. If some opposed women’s enfranchisement on the basis that they were politically inept and without knowledge of the public sphere, Condorcet made the case that education would solve the problem. Making a prophetic nod to the recognition of the social construction of gender, Condorcet plainly wrote: “I believe that all other differences between men and women are simply the result of education” (1994, p. 299). Condorcet directly contradicted Voltaire’s contention that women lacked the talent of invention, arguing that woman’s intellectual potential was largely unknown because she was deprived of the kind of education that would cultivate genius.

The importance of such analysis must be placed in the context of the long road to contemporary feminist theoretical thought. Judith Kegan Gardiner writes that 20th-century feminist theory’s most significant accomplishment is the explication of gender as socially constructed and not necessarily “the natural, necessary, or ideal characteristics of people with similar genitals” (2005, p. 35). Judith Lorber explains that gender has been a means “to justify the exploitation of an identifiable group—women” (1994, p. 5). We can see in Condorcet’s work recognition of the way in which gender can indeed be utilized to
subjugate women. In his essay, “On the Admission of Women to the Rights of Citizenship,” we can find a direct rebuke to the disempowering conceptualization of women as thoroughly other, and therefore inferior, to men. Condorcet’s essay adeptly rebukes common arguments against the enfranchisement of women in France. One by one, he proves the insipidity of various traditional ideas about women. He refutes the claim that pregnancy and menstruation will prevent women from exercising their rights by pointing out that men manage to carry out political obligations despite being prone to having “gout all winter” or catching “cold quickly” (1976, p. 98). In particular, this argument situates men in nature along with women and rejects the dualized view of women as imbedded in nature and men as part of transcendent culture. In dismissing the notion that women are naturally disposed to greater infirmity compared to men who are above such bestial connections to nature, Condorcet undermines the dualistic conceptual schema bolstering the patriarchal ideology, an ideology which many of Condorcet’s intellectual contemporaries maintained.

Moreover, Condorcet challenged the notion that women were fundamentally different than men, an idea the church and thinkers such as Rousseau, Diderot, Montesquieu, and Paine subscribed to. Condorcet indicates that social convention and laws were in part responsible for molding women into their current form.

[Women] are excluded from public affairs, from all that is decided according to rigorous ideas of justice or positive laws. The things with which they are occupied and upon which they act are precisely those which are regulated by natural propriety and sentiment. It is therefore unjust to allege, as an excuse for continuing to refuse women the enjoyment of their natural rights, grounds which only have a kind of reality because women do not exercise these rights. (1976, p. 100)

More than 150 years later, Simone de Beauvoir would write: “Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists” have striven “to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth” (Beauvoir, 2006, p. 119). Thus we find in Condorcet’s work not only the intellectual antecedent to contemporary male feminism, but also a precursor for 20th-century feminism more generally.

If women seem to be too concerned with matters such as beauty, appearances, and the like, Condorcet explains that this is a product of the ideas of propriety that society imbues in women from birth: “It is as reasonable for a woman to concern herself with her personal attractions as it was for Demosthenes to cultivate his voice and his gestures” (1976, p. 100). He further recognizes that it is foolish to overlook society’s role in shaping the ideas and attitudes of men and women. It is not nature, “but education, and social existence” that causes the difference between the way men and women reason.
Since it is society that makes women obsess over aesthetic beauty and decorum rather than politics and philosophical matters, we cannot expect women to do otherwise; and we should not presume their behavior proves a deficiency of reason. Condorcet notes: “Women are not governed, it is true, by the reason of men. But they are governed by their own reason” (1976, p. 100). Conscious of the patriarchal social order to which women are forced to conform, Condorcet seems to acknowledge the way in which oppressed groups develop their own intellectual tools for survival.

In addition to recognizing that women are capable of achieving greatness of intellect, Condorcet also believes many women already have exhibited such mental prowess, though in different intellectual arenas such as imagination. First, consider that the Encyclopedists largely agree that women’s capacity for rational thought was compromised by her imagination (Dock, 1983, p. 73). Yet Condorcet cites imagination as a tool used by women to produce great works. Specifically, he pointed to women authors such as mme de La Fayette and mme de Sevigne and their keen passion and sensibility as proof of genius as it related to the production of a dramatic work. Not only does Condorcet hold passion and sensibility in high regard, he even suggests that genius requires imagination and sensibility (Brookes, 1980, p. 329, n105). Such a stance once more deconstructs the fallacious dualisms which are used to bolster women’s oppression. Condorcet mends the split between reason and imagination, between reason and passion, and recognizes in women’s talents proof of her full humanity.

**SEXUALITY**

Another important aspect of Condorcet’s work on women is his departure from the dominant male intellectual perspective on sexuality, particularly as it relates to women. As will become clear, the majority of the Encyclopedists were as concerned with chastity as the religious authorities they sought to dethrone. Jaucourt explains that women’s supreme virtue is modesty, “a natural, wise, honest shame, a secret fear, a feeling for those things capable of effecting infamy” (Dock, 1983, p. 80). Dock explains that Jaucourt believes that “[t]he woman imbued with modesty is above reporting attacks on her honor—which would seem to deprive her of all recourse in the case of rape: ‘She prefers to be silent about those who have outraged her, when she cannot talk about it without bringing to light actions and expressions which by themselves alarm her virtue’” (Dock, p. 80). Jaucourt’s views complement those of Rousseau who writes that women must “learn to submit to injustice and to suffer the wrongs inflicted on her by her husband without complaints,” that through her “gentleness” she will eventually be victorious over him, “unless he is a perfect monster” (1995, pp. 578-579). Contributors such as Holbach also put a premium on virginal purity. He is on record critiquing Japanese men for their tendency to marry former prostitutes, despite the fact many such women were forced into
prostitution by their families. Meanwhile Jaucourt lists the practice of taking non-virgins as wives among the various practices of a stupid nation (Dock, 1983, p. 135). In all, these thinkers remained committed promulgators of patriarchal masculinity and its systematic subordination of women through sexual control.

While their attitudes about religion, rationality, and scientific investigation may have radically departed from the Catholic and Protestant Christian worldview, most 18th century male intellectuals promoted and upheld the control of women’s sexual and reproductive capacities, which cultural theorist Jane Caputi contends is “the core patriarchal practice” (2004, p. 393). In contrast, Condorcet disavowed such control and discounted sexist logic by highlighting the hypocrisy inherent in discussions of modesty and chastity. He rejected the idea that inadvisable sexual behavior constituted the root of all evil. “There is no virtue so easy to practice or appear to practice as chastity,” he wrote; “it is compatible with the absence of real virtue and the presence of every vice. From the moment chastity is considered of great importance every scoundrel is sure of obtaining public esteem at little expense” (quoted in Schapiro, 1963, p. 194). In countries that have boasted of their supreme morality “every vice, every crime, and even debauchery were sure to be prevalent,” writes Condorcet (in Schapiro, p. 194). Rather than clamoring for chastity and condemning feminine immodesty, Condorcet denounced police harassment of prostitutes and argued that women in the sex industry should be taught an occupation, not sent to prison (Schapiro, pp. 194-195).

While Montesquieu urged Europe to follow in the footsteps of the Romans in enacting laws purposed to “increase the number of marriages and children” (Kra, 1984, p. 283), Condorcet promoted women’s control of their reproductive powers. According to scholar David Williams, “Condorcet was an outspoken advocate of the right of women to plan their pregnancies prudently, illuminating the issue of birth control in a way that took him well beyond the horizons of his age (VI, 256-258)” (Williams, 2004, p. 168). Condorcet also sought to create “special hospitals for unmarried pregnant girls to which they could go without incurring the usual penalties for their condition, and he was concerned equally with the plight of their illegitimate children (VIII, 465-466)” (Williams, p. 169). Finally, Condorcet went so far as to assail the tyrannical policing of heteronormativity by repudiating murderous laws against homosexuality. Specifically, he criticized the practices of burning homosexuals alive, as was done in France, and subjecting them to mob violence, as in England (Schapiro, p. 195).

**CONDORCET’S PRACTICE OF COMPASSION AND EQUALITY IN HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

A salient feature of feminist epistemology is personal accountability (Collins, 2009, pp. 284-285). Personal experience is valued not only as a criterion
for knowledge (Collins; Krook, 2007), but also serves as an important site for verification of one’s publicly pronounced statements. For instance, in her discussion of Black Feminist thought, Collins notes how her students “refused to evaluate the rationality of [an author’s] written ideas without some indication of his personal credibility as an ethical human being” (Collins, p. 285). In short, one of the core features of feminist thinking is the recognition that one’s public positions are valued only insofar as they reflect one’s lived experience including one’s personal interactions with others. For this reason, Condorcet’s personal relationship with his wife and daughter are perhaps the most vital indications of his having embodied a truly “feminist” masculinity.

Unlike so many, past and present, Condorcet’s personal life matched his publicly professed ideals. Condorcet shared a uniquely equitable relationship with his wife, Sophie. Not only did he marry, uncommon among male intellectuals who preferred to have mistresses without obligation, Condorcet found in his spouse an intellectual partner who probably had a tremendous impact on his intellectual and political thought (Schapiro, 1963). At a time when women were objectified and appreciated as little more than beautiful distractions, Condorcet was uniquely devoted to Sophie (Schapiro). We catch a glimpse of Sophie’s love for Condorcet in a letter she wrote to him while he was in hiding during the Reign of Terror. With her husband deemed an enemy of the government, Sophie had no choice but to divorce Condorcet in order to be spared persecution (McLean, 1994): “I dare to believe that you know my heart well enough to feel that our mutual attachment is the bond uniting your life to mine. I cannot express how much this sacrifice is costing me…. It will leave a bitterness in my heart which only the justice of yours can soften” (Condorcet quoted in McLean, p. 30).

In my view, Condorcet’s 1794 letter to his daughter Eliza stands as among the most significant manifestation of his feminist masculinity. Condorcet’s letter offered sage advice to his then four-year-old on how best to live without worry for the constraints of codependence. He starts by stressing the importance of learning a skill so that she would be financially independent. He then urges her to realize the limited ability of wealth to bring about happiness (Condorcet, 1994, p. 284). Better to be poor and independent, he instructed her, than rich and dependent. The radical nature of such advice is realized when we consider that Condorcet is advising a girl to make her own way in the world during a time when women were seen as mere appendages to men and men’s lives.

To fully appreciate the significance of Condorcet’s advice to his daughter, it is instructive to consider Diderot’s relationship with his daughter, Angelique. Condorcet’s contemporary, Diderot had chosen his daughter Angelique’s spouse before she reached the age of two-years-old (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 303). McLaughlin comments that despite Diderot’s then professed derision of the institution of marriage and his support for alternatives to marriage, when it came to his own daughter he advanced the status quo in gender relations. The fact that Diderot’s daughter was married off just one month before he authored...
The Supplement au Voyage de Bougainville (in which he asserts that marriage is unnatural and contrary to individual dignity), is reason enough to call into question his commitment to his own ideas.

In discussing a letter written by Diderot to his daughter in advance of her marriage, McLaughlin writes: “His advice to her is not unlike that found in the most traditional marriage manuals of the day.” Indeed, Diderot’s letter to Angelique leaves no doubt that he believes a woman should submit to a man. In a letter dated September 13, 1772, Diderot tells Angelique that her new husband would now possess the authority he, as her father, had maintained over her (McLaughlin, 1984, p. 303). He advises Angelique that her “happiness is inseparable from that of your spouse… Have for [him] all the condescension imaginable” (quoted in McLaughlin, 1984, p. 303). Diderot counsels his daughter against the appearance of sexual impropriety, noting that “[o]ne has the right to judge women on appearances….” (p. 303). Diderot upholds the prejudice that the male sex is best suited to occupy the public sphere and the female sex is best suited to occupy the domestic sphere: “Exterior affairs are his; those of the interior are yours” (p. 304). Those women suffering from boredom and a sense of purposelessness should embrace household duties: “Rise early; give to your domestic occupations of all kinds the first hours of your morning; perhaps your entire morning. Fortify your soul” (pp. 303-304). McLaughlin summarizes Diderot’s advice this way: “Her life must now revolve entirely around that of her husband; she must receive all those whom he desires her to meet, but her own associations must be restricted as much as possible” (p. 303).

In contrast, Condorcet’s letter to his daughter expands upon his public statements on women. Rather than suggesting marriage as a means of social development, Condorcet recommends to Eliza the acquisition and application of “some skill in the arts and crafts or in exercising your mind” (Condorcet, 1994a, p. 285). Acquiring such a skill will succeed in not only staving off boredom, writes Condorcet, but may also secure independence:

... do not forget that your aim must be the daily pleasure of being busy, of doing something which ensures your independence, protects you from boredom, and prevents the vague distaste for existence and unexplained depression which affect otherwise peaceful and successful lives. (1994a, p. 285)

In place of the assumption that she will exist to serve a husband, Condorcet’s letter maintains the consistent assumption that Eliza has self-worth independent of others, and has or will have something to contribute to society. He urges his daughter to be benevolent, experience the pleasure of helping others in need not only by giving money but more importantly by giving time, “attention and enlightenment;” “Your benevolence will then be independent of your fortune and not limited by it; it will become an occupation and a source of pleasure” (p. 286). Absent from his advice is any notion that women belong to one particular sphere of existence. In contrast to the caged existence proffered by Diderot, Condorcet’s letter presumes that the world is open to Eliza.
What makes Condorcet’s letter unique has as much to do with what he does not say as what he does say. Condorcet does not deliver any platitudes about woman’s work or place in society. Not once does he mention or recommend marriage to Eliza. This silence coupled with his clear advice to be both self-reliant and to seek happiness in her life forms a clear if unspoken message: embrace your autonomy and supersede the gendered limitations placed upon you by society; do not submit to the patriarchal, prejudicial yoke of the age. And whereas women of his age were socially educated to receive their esteem from others, Condorcet urged Eliza to find joy in her own person: “Enjoy the feelings of the people you love; but above all, enjoy your own” (1994, p. 286).

Evidence of Condorcet’s embodiment of feminist masculinity is further apparent in his exaltation of the importance of emotional sensitivity and empathy for both human and nonhuman others. The weighty valuation of emotionality and empathy in both moral reasoning and validating knowledge is an important aspect of feminist thought. Carol Gilligan contends that the ethic of caring is manifest in women’s refusal to engage in “detachment and depersonalization” which characterizes patriarchal, masculine thought. The ethic of caring among women is responsible for their “insistence on making connections that can lead to seeing the person killed in war or living in poverty as someone’s son or father or brother or sister, or mother, or daughter, or friend” (2006, p. 209). Collins adds that “the ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (2009, pp. 281-282).

Condorcet understands empathy as a key aspect of leading what he understands as a good life. In the letter to Eliza he attributes “gentle sensitivity” or “humanity” to “the natural feeling which makes us share the sorrow of all sentient beings” (1994, p. 287). He goes on to write that this sensitivity, “which can be a source of happiness,” should not be limited with regard to human relationships but should be extended “even to animals.” One should be sensitive to the happiness and pain of anything that belongs to us. In addition to recognizing its contribution to human happiness, Condorcet also believed that empathy was the salient component of right moral reasoning:

When I left college, I fell to reflecting on the moral ideas of justice and virtue. I felt that I saw that the interest we have in being just and virtuous arose from the pain one sensitive being must feel on becoming aware of the pain suffered by another. Since then … I have tried to preserve this sentiment in all its natural energy. I gave up hunting which I had enjoyed, and would not even kill an insect unless it was very harmful. (Condorcet quoted in Mclean, 1994, p. 7)

Feeling a genuine connection to the human and nonhuman lives around him, Condorcet held that self-respect is anchored in the treatment of others. To ensure that we do not treat another dishonorably, he instructed Eliza, we
must look to the golden rule, the ancient principle of empathy: “Think of the pain you have felt as a result of even minor injustices or mistakes, and imagine how it must feel to be the victim of serious injustices or truly shameful misconduct” (1994, p. 287).

Some wonder how Condorcet managed to maintain such progressive positions during a time when the cultural current overwhelmingly bolstered the notion that women were inferior to men. I believe we can understand Condorcet’s feminist proclivity as a consequence of his emotional wholeness as a human being. Consider, first, the process by which a dominator or master subject deludes himself into thinking he is superior to another person. Citing Schwalbe, Connell and Messerschmidt (2010, p. 223) write that power is typically maintained through a strategy of dehumanizing the group of people one wishes to be in control of. This process of dehumanizing others succeeds insofar as the dominator suppresses empathy and achieves emotional distance from the group marked as “other.” Plumwood describes this process as “radical exclusion” or “hyperseparation.” Radical exclusion is one of five components of the logic of dualism or master consciousness (Plumwood, 1993, pp. 48-55). One engaged in radical exclusion often identifies the “other” as not only different but substantially inferior, thereby supporting the master subject’s feeling of absolute superiority. Plumwood writes that this conceptual tool has been used to distinguish “between things sacred and things profane in religious thought” and, more specifically, “to mark out, protest and isolate a privileged group” (pp. 49-50). Rather than seeing himself as part of some inherently privileged group, Condorcet managed to recognize that men’s privilege was a quite unnatural product of sexist oppression. Condorcet’s refusal to see himself, as a man, as superior to women left both his empathy and emotional connection to the entirety of humanity in tact. As a result, he was able to see through the dehumanizing rhetoric around women’s inferiority to men.

CONCLUSION

Today, Condorcet’s example stands as proof that men are not limited to the patriarchal masculine model of selfhood. Condorcet’s life and work project a form of manhood we can rightly describe as “feminist masculinity.” Approximating that which hooks identifies as the partnership model of being, Condorcet’s life was characterized by respect for human plurality, a valorization of equity and empathy, and a rejection of at least some of the central dualisms (reason/nature, reason/women and men/women) responsible for upholding inequality and patriarchal masculinity’s definition of self through the objectification of others. Whereas Condorcet’s contemporaries were beholden to a dualistic intellectual schema, informing their conceptualization of man as belonging to a fundamentally different realm of being than woman, Condorcet’s analyses are informed by a basic recognition for the connectivity between things, including humans and animals. Thus, Condorcet argues that
men and women are more alike than they are different, and that which we identify as femininity is a product of education (culture), not nature.

Moreover, Condorcet lived a life which rejected the false distinction between public life and private life. His personal life is indistinguishable from his private life. As such, Condorcet lived a life that acknowledged the political character of one’s personal interactions. His personal practices, including his communication with his daughter and his relationship with his wife, seemed to cohere with his publicly professed ideas about women. The life example of Condorcet begs a variety of questions: was he the only one? Were there others like him? And, perhaps most importantly, does Condorcet’s example force us to be more critical of those whose prejudices and oppressive and contradictory behaviors we have excused as understandable errors of the age? Condorcet’s example of masculinity stands as a refutation to the universality of patriarchal masculinity and is a testament to the viability of feminist masculinity. Condorcet’s example provides men with precisely the kind of nondualistic and nonsexist model of self-assertion Hooks (2004, p. 114) contends is necessary to reclaim maleness from dominator culture and violent, sexist, domineering model for masculinity.

References


