

ONE

FEMALE READERS AND *L'ESPACE DU LIVRE*

A QUIET REVOLUTION

The only place where I stopped was a rather large chamber surrounded by a delicately worked grille that held countless books of all colors and all forms, in admirable condition; I was in such a state of enchantment that I hardly thought I would be able to leave without having read them all.

—Zilia, *Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, Lettre 35

In 1919, Albert Cim published *Les Femmes et les livres*, which gives an account of important private library collections held by early modern French women.¹ The women who figure in his book are both known and unknown and include individuals as different as Charlotte Corday, who is said to have given away all her books, except her Plutarch, before leaving for Paris to assassinate Marat; Louise-Diane-Françoise de Clermont-Gaillerande, Duchesse de Brancas ou de Villars-Brancande (1711–1784), whose library was composed of 3000 to 4000 volumes; and Mademoiselle le Duc, marquise de Tourvoie, identified as a “danseuse à l’Opéra, maîtresse puis femme de Louis de Bourbon, comte de Clermont,” who possessed a personal library consisting of an astonishingly large number of books on theology. Also on this list of early women bibliophiles is the name of one of the most visible and controversial women of the late eighteenth century, Marie-Antoinette, who, according to inventories possessed two different collections of books. The first, catalogued as “La Bibliothèque de la Reine Marie-Antoinette,” was located in the Château des Tuileries, while the second, under the title “Livres du Boudoir de la Reine Marie-Antoinette,” was her private collection kept at the Petit Trianon.

The holdings of the first library, transported in 1793 to the Bibliothèque Nationale, are, one assumes, the officially sanctioned library for public display. At the royal palace, this library had occupied ten armoires, identified by letters of the alphabet and arranged by the king in the following categories: *religion*, *histoire*, *art (sciences et arts)*, and *belles lettres*. Below the royal coat of arms, each volume bore on its spine or cover the initials “CT” for Château des Tuileries. The largest number of volumes of this collection belonged to the category of history, while the second most numerous were shelved under *belles lettres*, including a number of works by women, such as *Les Femmes illustres* by Mademoiselle de Scudéry, Madame de Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* and *Zaïde*, fairy tales by Madame D’Aulnoy, and almost all of Madame Riccoboni’s novels.

The second library of the queen—those “livres du boudoir”—was catalogued by order of the Convention and sent in 1800 to the Bibliothèque publique de Versailles, after duplicate copies of its holdings were sold. Rumor quickly had it that this library was composed of books “of an ultralight kind,” an insinuation only partially contested by another nineteenth-century bibliophile, Ernest Quentin-Bauchart, who opined that in his judgment the queen’s personal library was no more morally disreputable than those of many other “great ladies of the time.” In fact, there was “nothing at all scandalous about it,” he added.² Nonetheless, the charge stuck: “the books from the boudoir” were exactly the type of reading that the moral police might expect from a discredited queen.

It is the distinctly different names given to these two collections of books that arrests my attention: *bibliothèque* and *boudoir*. For this choice, it seems to me, is dictated less by the architectural structure in which the books were found than in what is implied about the quality of the works and their putative reader. Any book characterized as belonging in the boudoir automatically is deemed suspect, assumed to be of lightweight, frivolous nature, in the libertine or erotic mold. The sniff of disapprobation implicit in the very naming of this collection serves to censure the queen through her reading material. On the contrary, by identifying the books of the other collection as a *bibliothèque*, the cataloguers bestow a legitimacy on those holdings, rendering them honorable reading, since reading that takes place in the *bibliothèque*, undertaken for serious purposes, carries prestige and dignifies both text and reader. Underscoring the principle whereby certain spaces are associated with body or mind—*boudoir* or *bibliothèque*—and are further associated with female and male respectively, Madame de Genlis expressed considerable disapproval of the fad among early nineteenth-century women who, she acerbically observed, had taken to referring to their *cabinet*—a sex-neutral space, in her view—as their *boudoir*, thereby reinvoking a space of sexual intrigue and moral laxity. “This strange words,” she caustically objects, “formerly was used only by courtesans.”³

It is the tradition of associating female reading with a particular morally compromised space that disturbs her. For, to characterize women's reading as that derived from or involved with the boudoir was both a spatial marker and totalizing shorthand, which not only eroticized the reading act and the reader, but essentialized the woman as pure sexuality. To evoke the woman reader as easy prey, victim, or unthinking consumer by associating her with a particular space is a reminder that, as Robert Scholes has written, the human condition is often looked upon as one of textuality filled with tropes and traps.⁴ It was a view that Madame de Genlis and other women challenged. In an age in which female literacy was low, and even more so when the fair sex was so often not given credit for having brains, she had concluded that reading idly and for pleasure, as one might do in the boudoir, was a luxury her sex could not afford. Embracing a model of telic reading, defined by critic Matei Calinescu as reading for a goal external to itself, Madame de Genlis also knew that such reading could always become paratelic or autotelic—a goal in itself, an intrinsically motivated process—which is her objective.⁵ However, reading in the boudoir was antithetical to this goal because space is neither innocent, nor has it been used innocently against women.

QUESTIONS OF SPACE: DISCURSIVE, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL

Indeed, as psychologists and cultural anthropologists tell us, space is not a neutral philosophical concept, but rather an ideological structure and an iconographic language offering provocative insights into both the construction and the representation of identity. Not surprisingly, it has also been a concept central to scholarly arguments framed around issues of private and public space and the transformation of those spaces as the institutions and practices of a new bourgeois society were established.⁶ In the last decades of the twentieth century, a number of women scholars, including Dorinda Outram, Joan Landes, Dena Goodman, Joan DeJean, and Erica Harth, used the notion of space to retell or explain the story of women, choosing to examine discursive, political, or social spaces, in the effort to say what happened to women and women's works under the ancien régime.⁷ While my intention is to focus on another kind of space—*l'espace du livre*—it is nonetheless useful to rehearse their arguments.

In 1988, at the height of academic feminism, Joan Landes published an important feminist study in which she argued that ironically the collapse of the ancien régime led to even "more pervasive gendering of public space." Speaking of the paradoxical relationship between feminism and republicanism that resulted in feminism adopting a "highly gendered bourgeois male discourse that depended on women's domesticity and the silencing of the 'public' woman of the aristocracy and popular classes,"⁸ Landes set forth the major themes of women's disenfranchisement, which most subsequent commentators have

renewed, agreeing that when social or political arbiters dismiss, disqualify, or deal with female speech as inherently contradictory, women end up by being treated as second-class citizens.

Dorinda Outram has written that eighteenth-century women were excluded from speech even when they adopted the revolutionary discourse of virtue, since their enterprise turned into a futile attempt to legitimate themselves and establish a new identity in society.⁹ Hence, while acknowledging that many women did speak out in the public domain, she underscores the point that their speech failed to carry weight in public discourse. In part, this was because the universalistic rhetoric that women adopted carried such internal contradictions that they were ultimately ensnared in a catch-22 position. The paradox was that the woman who spoke publicly could not be considered virtuous, but if women did not speak, they had no chance of gaining respect for their minds. Quite simply, female virtue and speaking publicly were incompatible, according to Outram, because virtue was defined differently for the two sexes. For males, she says, virtue meant putting the state above personal or sectional interests, whereas for women, virtue was personal, revolving almost exclusively around the question of chastity.

While one might object that women themselves were redefining virtue, away from sex and meaning something more like self-esteem and self-improvement, it is nonetheless true that Outram's main point about public space and the exclusion of women's voices in political matters is accurate. More interesting and more relevant, however, are several other points she makes. The first concerns her own demonstration of caution about treating "women of the eighteenth century" as a single category and undifferentiated whole. And the second, associated point is her critical observation that feminist historians have tended to forefront only left-wing female political activists, thereby ignoring the masses of uninvolved or even counterrevolutionary women. Arguing for the inclusion of more "registers" of women's expression and particularly of more nonpublic texts, such as diaries, personal letters, and autobiography, Outram makes the very important point that "normal female response to the Revolution" was not to embrace but rather to reject it.¹⁰ Moreover, as she concludes, the vast majority of women in the future would be adopting another universalistic, highly conservative rhetoric—that of the Church. In persuasively arguing that women's most enduring role was in the counterrevolution, she declares that it was female devotion to throne and altar during the revolution that would, in the course of the following century, ultimately determine two sex-differentiated spheres of politics, with women adhering in greater numbers to the right-wing interests of the Church and men to left-wing republicanism.¹¹ Her cautionary statements about equating eighteenth-century women's political identity with twentieth-century feminism's goals are, in my view, salutary. They also support a more focused speculation about the specificity of the cultural project for and by women, such as will be undertaken later in this chapter

through an investigation of the protocols and principles of female reading in eighteenth-century France.

In another approach to women under the ancien régime, Erica Harth examined the interplay of gender, space, and speech in order to reveal how women had been excluded from all the new discursive spaces of power—the café, the club, the journal, the *conférence*, and especially the Paris *académies*—which led, in her judgment, to the development of a modern rational discourse of inquiry and progress wholly shaped by a single sex.¹² Even in the salon, that ambiguous space, that is not quite public or quite private, Harth says, women were not much more than hostesses who merely brought together the men who were to write the treatises and essays that would found the Enlightenment. To be sure, she acknowledges, the boundaries of the salon, the *académie*, and the *conférence* as gendered spaces were not always absolute, since salons sometimes crossed the line into *académies* and *conférences* occasionally had mixed audiences. But the primary meeting spaces open to the two sexes were those within private dwellings—the *alcôves*, *ruelles*, *cabinets*, and *chambres*. Indeed, this leads Harth to set the bed (*le lit de repos*, similar to a reclining sofa) and the library in juxtaposition, calling them emblematic of two different spaces and two types of discursive practices—a notion that likewise underlies the thematic focus of this chapter. For whereas *le lit de repos* was situated next to a *ruelle*, or conversational space, where visitors, either male or female, would sit, and was associated with inconsequential speech, the library was a place, described by Antoine Furetière in his *Dictionnaire universel* (1690), where male scholars and humanists would gather in an informal academy. As Harth writes, “The library, where in general rules of censorship were suspended, was a privileged space for research and discussion. There, scholars of different religions, beliefs, and interests, and social backgrounds agreed to disagree and to air their questions as openly as possible. The conditions of freedom for this embryonic republic of letters were discipline and order in the proceedings [and] mutual trust.”¹³ Hence, the *ruelle* was the place of casual conversation, while the library was the space giving rise to the production of written texts. It is a distinction that effectively reveals the phenomenon of gendered spaces, as Harth understands them in the mirror images she establishes, with the triangle of bed-speech-woman, on the one hand, and, on the other, library-writing-male.

In the eighteenth century, these two spaces were transmuted into two separate views of the woman reader. Both the medico-philosophical establishment and visual artists of the rococo tradition imagined the woman reader primarily in the boudoir, where all activities, including reading, are frivolously self-involved. Women of ambition, on the other hand, provided an alternative vision of the enlightened and responsible woman reader, which sought to conjoin her reading with the notion of the library and all it implied about the seriousness and usefulness of purposeful activity. Their objective was, in fact, to break out of the gendered opposition, as identified in

Harth's paradigm, and to move from the boudoir—that corrupted space associated with ancien-régime politics and in which the female principle is embodied in the devalued “speech” of the body—to the realm of the *bibliothèque*, which they envisioned as an ideal and nonpoliticized place of objective knowledge and liberating truth. This is the move that Madame de Genlis makes when she gives up the paints and pomades of the boudoir for the books and paper and pen of the *bibliothèque/cabinet*, as described in chapter 3. And this is the ideal of the library as a shelter for the mind, which Madame Roland in chapter 2 evokes when, while awaiting a sentence of execution, she uses the memories of a life filled with books to help her put aside “the injustices of men, their follies, and my own wrongs.”

The focus on two discrete spaces that oppose body and mind should illuminate why women adopted a *politics* of virtue as a means of repositioning themselves through textual representation and language, as they sought to offer a new idea of the sensitive yet responsible woman to their readers. For their goal never was, I believe, to set women's aspirations at the level of political participation in the business of the nation, but rather, much more modestly, but nonetheless historically important, to begin the work of encouraging female confidence by asking women to commit themselves to a new view of their own capacity for courage and moral action, and to begin this task by reading excellent authors. For, as the *Journal des dames* said, “The best refutation that one can give to the prejudice that refuses Women the pleasure of cultivating Belles-Lettres is the Catalogue of all those ladies who have distinguished themselves in this career (of reading books)” (June 1764). Thus despite Landes's negative assertion that reading would become for women “an element in the process in which life was remade along domestic and virtuous grounds,”¹⁴ and Outram's judgment that the very idea of virtue, so crucial to revolutionary discourse and so absent during the ancien régime, would be the very element that would bring down even the most committed of women, such as Manon Roland,¹⁵ it is, I submit, women's embrace of book culture that is the most important arena in which to judge their contributions to social change. For them, political invisibility was not particularly a liability, because it was not the issue. If the paradox for women was that they were simultaneously absorbed into and excluded from rational universalist discourse, then the way out of the dilemma was to redefine the terms and to discard the male definition of female virtue concerned with body and chastity, replacing it with a new, enlightened vision of female virtue through the pursuits of the mind and the exercise of reason.

While I am aware of the dangers of appearing reductive by invoking two specific spaces—the boudoir and the library, representing the dichotomy between body and mind—in fact, I believe that by doing so we avoid the problem of overreading women's objectives and will be able simultaneously

to argue that women *did* participate in a revolution. For, as Chrétien-Guillaume Lamoignon de Malesherbes, Directeur de la Librairie from 1750 to 1763, observed in a speech in 1775, the world of the ancien régime was being transformed through a significant shift in the structure of communications. Whereas previously people had needed to assemble to receive news and ideas, now the literate had their primary information sources in books and other printed materials. Thus, a formerly *aural* public was becoming a *reading* public.¹⁶ With the publication of a veritable tidal wave of reading materials, from novels to journals to political and philosophical tracts, reading became the principle means of staying abreast of the flood of new ideas. Women, as well as men, were reading in ever greater numbers, with female literacy growing faster than male literacy in the eighteenth century, despite a continuation of absolute differences.¹⁷ In turn, women writers, whether novelists, journalists, or fabulists, were increasingly inclined to consider that female education was a *textual* undertaking, in which reading was the most potent force in the enlightenment and self-improvement of the individual woman to whom they directed their ideology of virtue. As a consequence, in promoting *l'espace du livre* these women were in the forefront of a cultural revolution, one that would pit two views of the woman reader, as of the reading act, in opposition.

In the pages ahead, I will first consider the trope of the woman reader as presented by a number of eighteenth-century visual artists, many of whom built on the discourse of the antiwoman reader by locating her reading in the boudoir and stipulating the boudoir as a space of desire. Against those playful or ironic images of the embodied and eroticized reader, based on a notion of consumption—woman consumed as object, woman as consuming subject—women themselves tried to place the ideal figurative space of women's reading and the production of work outside the boudoir. Or, as Madame de Genlis did, in the *cabinet*, which represented for her objective knowledge, reason, and the unsexed mind. As the single discursive space to which large numbers of women, from intellectuals to pedagogues to bourgeois mothers, laid claim, the room-of-their-own was to become *l'espace du livre*, which in the broadest sense means books and access to knowledge, personal, moral, and learned. Reading was the bridge between the private–domestic spaces to which they were confined and the public spaces which they were denied. Books blurred the lines between those spaces. Reading, then, rather than speech, became the focus of women's cultural and prefeminist agenda, as the most accessible means by which female lives could be improved. It is through the issues of reading, I believe, that today we may come to understand the real quality of woman's consciousness in the eighteenth century and to discover how in fact and despite conventional assessment to the contrary, many women did participate in a revolution—a *reading* revolution.

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS AND
THEORIES OF GENDERED READING

Since works of art provide what Linda Docherty has called a window on ideology, it is not surprising that historians of reading so frequently use visual interpretations of women as readers to help establish the past.¹⁸ For, as Docherty points out, the mental and temporal aspects of reading make it an activity particularly amenable to interpretive manipulation (338). Thus, literary and social critics study painting as a complement to statistical research. The latter seek to answer questions about the economics of book publishing and reading, distribution, and the development of venues for obtaining reading material—bookstores, reading rooms, subscription services, libraries.¹⁹ Literary critics examine how pictorial representation dialogues with or resists contemporaneous reading theory and practice. The visual arts, then, supplement economics, sociology, and history, bringing in the psychological dimension, since painters often seek to penetrate the interior monologue taking place between reading subject and object read. At times, they use the book to symbolize power and the pursuit of knowledge by the subject–reader, and at other times to signify leisure, escapism, imagination, sexual readiness, contemplation, isolation, pleasure, desire, concentration, absorption, virtue, vice, vulnerability, separation. Consequently, the book is almost never a simple sign.

In eighteenth-century rococo art, for instance, the trope of the woman reader offers some of the clearest evidence of gendered thinking about reading in the age of the Enlightenment. Roger Chartier has written that reading in the painting of that period signifies differently for the two sexes, with women's reading commonly being shown as an act of private pleasure, while men's is the pretext to reveal status or social condition, or a more reflective and meditative state of mind.²⁰ In demonstration of the first proposition, illustrators of the rococo show the woman reader in feminine spaces, the *boudoir*, the *cabinet privé*, the *chambre à coucher*, which is often slightly to considerably in disarray, suggestive of the effects that reading has on her. Such paintings seem to show that women read with their bodies, and that the act of reading produces in them physiological effects having moral and behavioral consequences. When the artist does show her in the library, it is with what might be described as an ironic leer.²¹ Jean-Marie Goulemot suggests that irony was precisely the goal of Emmanuel de Ghendt in his intentionally mistitled sketch, *Le Midi* (Figure 3), depicting a young woman in the grip of an erotic reverie, including the suggestion of masturbatory behavior. The title, Goulemot proposes, should more rightfully be *The Effects of Reading* or *The Influence of Wicked Books*, because the illustration emphasizes the physical consequences of the book on the female reader.²² In this view of the woman reader experiencing the effects of the book, de Ghendt playfully depicts the idea that a woman's reading encounter with a text of desire leads to guilty behaviors.



FIGURE 3. Emmanuel de Ghendt, *Le Midi*, Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

If the visual artist takes an ironically humorous view of the woman reader “under the influence,” both the Church (through a representative such as Father Porée) and the male medical and philosophical establishment, with doctors such as S. A. Tissot and D. T. Bienville, or their colleagues Pierre Roussel, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, and Paul-Victor de Sèze,

produced theories of behavior that were corporeal in nature with far more negative consequences for the promotion of women's reading.²³ For these men, who built on the approach of moral anthropologists for whom sexual difference was located in no specific organ, but rather in the entire "sensible system," the female reader was like a vessel waiting to be filled. Her reading encounters became "invasions" by the aggressive (male) text; she was either the seduced victim or in guilty and criminal collusion with an anthropomorphized "predator" text. Such anthropomorphizing is, of course, something of a convention of rhetoric, since the book is often attributed with the physical characteristics of the human being, possessing a spine, divided bilaterally into left and right sides, having voice and soul, and also intentions.²⁴ But it takes on an insalubrious role when the female reader becomes the hunted prey or gullible victim, though never the independent consumer of a text, capable of asserting mastery over the book and/or of appropriating it for herself.

While most antiwoman reader commentary in the eighteenth century is less direct about the effects on woman's sexual behavior than de Ghendt, the primary fear alluded to again and again in conduct books, and often ironized in prefaces to novels such as *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, is that the text will engage the female reader in a dangerous process of fantasy construction. Since the text "forms" the reader, and not vice versa, the woman who reads a fiction of desire will be modeled like clay by her reading and subject to uncontrolled desire. Her reading will be a "priming" activity, nicely ripening her for seduction. In agreement with Rousseau's idea that no honest girl would read a *roman d'amour*, the male author of the *Manuel de la toilette et de la mode*, a conduct book for women in the 1770s, railed against novels, which he called "contemptible" and whose single merit was in his view to flatter "the depravity of the reader."²⁵ "There are books," he weightily opined, "that one must not read in order to remain virtuous and out of respect for public opinion, which quite correctly esteems that a young woman should remain ignorant about certain things." The problematics of female ignorance and whether it should be equated with innocence and virtue is, of course, one of the many issues that Diderot explores with erotic intent only partly veiled through the body of Suzanne Simonin in *La Religieuse*, and the subject equally attracts the rococo artist who trades heavily in erotic equivocation.

The charms of the questionably innocent female are the subject of another representation of the female reader as vessel or victim of the text, when Pierre-Antoine Baudouin portrays in *La Lecture* (Figure 2) a female subject who appears "at risk" from a text conceived as both carnal and phallic. Located in the *cabinet cum boudoir*, Baudouin's woman reader is half-lying in her chair, head back and resting against the cushions, her limbs limp, an open book at her side. It is doubtful that her reading matter is a volume of religion or history; rather, it must be a novel, which has exercised its power on her delicate fibers and exquisite sensibility. The viewer's intrusion at a very private moment upon this woman in a swoon or intense

reverie is all the more unsettling because she is not situated in a sexually neutral place, but rather in a coquettishly appointed boudoir. To be sure, the room contains writing table, globe, maps, books, and a musical instrument, but it is nonetheless a boudoir with its bed-drapery, a dressing screen, the erotically charged and ubiquitous lapdog. If not Boucher's frankly sexual and disheveled boudoir of Figure 4, Baudouin's boudoir is presented unambiguously as the space of woman's guilty pleasure through reading. Boucher's subject, of course, evokes much more explicitly, through form and position, a voluptuousness that seems at first only tangentially associated with reading. However, the open book next to the nude woman suggests another possibility and potential pun on the idea of reading as unveiling. For rather than the truth being unveiled by the book, it is the female reader herself who is unveiled. It is as though her reading has been a sensual preparation, an erotic primer, similar to what Peter Brooks calls a kind of forepleasure that "could include both delay and advance in the textual dynamic . . . the creation of . . . 'dilatatory space' through which we would seek to advance towards the discharge at the end, yet all the while perversely delaying, returning backwards . . . to the point of departure."⁶

This page intentionally left blank.

Such images that visually textualize the woman reader may reveal, as art historian Michael Fried has suggested in another respect, the invention of man and of his need. In describing the asymmetrical relationship between man and woman, he said, "The woman is made a reader and consequently a text only in response to an initial act of textual self-representation on the part of the man; the successful lover is the author, at one remove, of the text woman becomes."²⁷ That is, she becomes the sensitive and sexually vulnerable reader, because such is *his* desire.²⁸ In Fried's interpretation, the woman subject in the painting is the "text" of male psychology in which he creates the female reader according to his needs and, through that image, can observe her, again and again, for his pleasure.

Something similar transpires in a painting by Louis-Léopold Boilly, *A Young Painter and His Model* (Figure 5), though this time both male and female are shown in contemplation of a painting that is the *mise-en-abyme* representation of their mutual desire created during the sittings. Reading from left to right across the painting, as one does the page, we see on the table the box of sundries with lid askew, a glass jar, an alabaster nude sculpture of a woman, a canister, salmon-colored ribbons and sashes—one on the table, the other flung over a background easel, as though denoting "untied," "opened," "revealing." Draped on the table somewhat precariously is a rich tapestry cloth, perhaps earlier used by the nude model to cover her body during rest periods. On this fabric sit two books, while the model, her bosom awash in the same light as the sculpture, holds a third dog-eared volume, as though interrupted in her reading. Seated behind her is the young painter, one hand on her arm, the other pointing to the completed work of art in the far right. As the woman model gazes upon it, head tilted back and lips parted in surprise and pleasure, she sees not the image she was expecting, but rather one of the painter's erotic desire, which has painted her asleep and him at her bedside, a hand cupped over her breast. This silent *déclaration d'amour*, a text within a text, or painting within a painting, duplicates the *mise-en-abyme* aspect of the reading act in which the reader of the romance not only reads herself into the text of the protagonist but mirrors the same erotic pleasure in being chosen and desired and imagining herself "there."

Another visual textualization of the woman reader that focuses on the interdependency of sex and reading is a 1988 film called *La Lectrice*.²⁹ In this intelligent, yet playful and ironic confection, part fairy tale, part spoof, part celebration of reading, harking back to the spirit of the rococo, Deville presents brilliantly the topoi and lieux communs of reading: stories within stories; visual puns and intertexts; reading a life and living a reading; superimposed acts of reading on acts of sex; reading as reading-in-the-mind or reading between the pages; reading as a protosexual activity, and the dangers that accompany it.

Appropriately for a text that focuses on the relationship between book, sex, and reader, the action begins in the *Lectrice's* bed. Her live-in partner



FIGURE 5. Louis-Léopold Boilly, (1761–1845), *A Young Painter and His Model*, ca. 1788–1792, oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 14 7/8 in. (46 x 37.9 cm), Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, purchased with the Beatrice Oenslager Chace (Class of 1928) Art Acquisition fund, the Madeleine H. Russell (class of 1937) Fund, and the Hillyer / Mather / Tryon Fund, 1996.

pleads tired eyes and asks if she will read aloud to him a novel called *La Lectrice* by Raymond Jean.³⁰ At that moment a wonderful new *métier* is born, and the female protagonist becomes a professional reader, who will advertise her services and offer housecalls to a variety of clients who for one reason or another need or wish to be read to. Deville's reader, played by the actress

Miou-Miou, is nothing if not the essential sensual reader—kittenish but also sensitive and intelligent—and in short order, her clients include a wheelchair-bound young man whose mother wishes to divert him with readings by Maupassant and Baudelaire; a blind widow of a Russian general who wants to delight once again in the words of Tolstoy and Marx; a child to whom she reads *Alice au pays des merveilles* and with whom she cavorts at a traveling fair; a wealthy président-directeur-général who does not understand the pleasures of slowness (such as Milan Kundera has described them, one might add³¹) until she reads to him while langorously and sensuously engaging in sex; a retired judge who has her read to him, in his book-lined library, explicitly sexual scenes from Sade's *Les 120 Journées*.

Although one might normally think that as a static subject reading would be uncinematic, Deville shows that it is in fact a dynamic process. The reader, the text, and the client become involved in complex relationships with one another that take them to “places” they otherwise never would have visited. When the Lectrice reads, she mediates the text for her client/viewer involving him in what has been called a performative reading.³² For instance, the sexual tension that exists between reader and text takes shape in actuality in the scene in which the Lectrice brushes her skirt in such a way that it exposes her bare thigh to the eyes of the invalid youth. As she reads aloud “La Chevelure,” Maupassant's short story of displaced eroticism, her visual appearance and voice cause the youth to experience frightening feelings of arousal. By staging the reader's response, making it a visual phenomenon, a merging of reader and text takes place. Before our very own eyes we have ample proof of the pleasure of the text, and it is a pleasure that at base is sexual, involving the woman reader who fulfills a male's fantasy. Reader of the text, she is also the performer of his fantasies through the mediation of a text he asks her to read.

While this film is at once a genial satire of the professional reader (interpreter, reviewer, theorist), it is also a reader's delight celebrating the seductive pleasures of reading at all ages. But, as the film shows, being a reader is a “profession” requiring art, intelligence, talent, and feeling. And it is also a craft, in danger of becoming lost or of consuming itself. What makes the film so delightful and so French is its very rococo mixture of whimsy, intelligence, and sex.

Reading a film, like reading a text, other theorists say, functions primarily through a sexualized notion of vision. In developing her notion of sexuality and the reading encounter, critic Emma Wilson, for instance, concludes that the pleasures of viewing and of reading are coextensive, both located in a sexualized notion of vision.³³ Reading texts of desire, whether the printed word or the visual text, as in the image of the woman reading in her boudoir by Baudouin, might depend, then, in Wilson's view, on an economy of vision that engages the reader of the text or image in a complicit or potentially voyeuristic encounter. Further, the woman presented in the image is not only the subject of the artist's work, but also, in a type of *mise-en-abyme* structure of desire, the constantly replicated object of desire of each

successive viewer. Hence the artist's desire for the woman is reproduced through the female subject in collusive relationship with a text of desire, and yet again when the viewer is invited to assume the spectatorial position of his (or her) own desire, in endless replication. In this approach, the spectator/reader becomes a kind of voyeur who engages in a type of violation or transgression in an erotic encounter with the woman–reader subject.

This is the subject of an exquisitely painted work of equivocal content by Francois De Troy, *The Garter* (Figure 6), which should perhaps more

© 2005 State University of New York Press, Albany

This page intentionally left blank.

appropriately be called “the reading encounter.” This scene shows a young woman who had been reading prior to being interrupted by the approach of an entreating male. Unlike the typical rococo image, this picture places the subjects in an aristocratic salon with gilded mirror, Louis XV table, a luxuriously sculpted clock, and a piece of furniture called a *bibliothèque*. As we know from historians of eighteenth-century culture, books were precious items, due to their substantial cost, and were frequently kept behind lock and door. In fact, they could be stored in a variety of pieces of furniture from the humblest *tablette à livres*, a small locking cabinet that might contain other objects, to more substantial pieces such as the *buffet grillé*, the *bibliothèque à deux battants grillés*, the *buffet en forme de bibliothèque*, or the *armoïre à deux portes*—all of which would typically be locked between uses.³⁴ In this painting, the *bibliothèque* of the salon, abundantly filled with books behind glass doors, has both a decorative and practical function, signifying wealth and knowledge.

The viewer will note that the book has been closed and is lying on the table, suggesting that the female reader—a strikingly modern figure with her short and curly coiffure—has been surprised or caught off-guard by the visitor, and has rapidly put down her reading. An aristocrat by his clothes, sword, and properly pigtailed hair, the male is nonetheless portrayed as an intruder. Both man and woman are locked in gaze—she, startled, and he with imploring, doe-like eyes, as he gestures with one hand. The equivocal morality of the woman reader is proposed by her double action: with one hand she brazenly raises her skirts, revealing a bare calf, while with outstretched arm she pushes away the man’s advances. She is alarmed by his demeanor; her lips are tightly pursed, while his seem slightly apart. The erotic implications of the scene may suggest that a woman who has the impudence to have intellectual pretensions and reads novels or philosophical tracts or scientific treatises opens herself to such attacks on her chastity (hence her unseemly display of so much leg), or, alternatively, that a woman who reads will not be exercising sufficient vigilance against attacks on her virtue, both from within the book and from men. Perhaps this man is only asking for what he might reasonably believe he can expect from a woman indulging in reading, which he may presumptuously assume deals with “forbidden” material.

By entitling his painting *The Garter*, and combining it with a female reader, De Troy plays the book against the garter, so to speak, thereby evoking the intertextual relationship of reading and sex. Since women’s reading had conventionally been proposed in antiwoman rhetoric as a “priming activity,” one in which she seeks escape—perhaps from domestic responsibilities and/or in sexual release—it is possible to read this scene as showing a woman who has been surprised in a guilty activity, since reading for pleasure is often seen as tantamount to pleasuring oneself. The male intruder may either be proposing himself as a more appropriate partner or, on the other hand, may be presented by the painter as the figurative consequence of woman’s reading. The fact that the woman is in a salon and not the intimate

and private boudoir suggests that if she has been engaged in guilty behavior caused by her reading, she has truly “forgotten herself,” for this is a semipublic room. From an antiwoman reading stance, the transgression may be hers, for she has scorned both sexual and gender protocols to indulge in a potentially dangerous pastime. Though not a rococo painting, De Troy’s portrayal clearly shows, as much as those of de Ghendt and Baudouin, that reading and sexuality *are* intertwined in provocative ways.

The sense of transgression in De Troy’s picture recalls an episode in Manon Roland’s *Mémoires* that deals provocatively with a similar violation of woman’s privacy, this time by a father. In the *septième cahier*, Manon describes how one day, during her absence, Monsieur Phlipon took it upon himself to bring a visitor, the worthy Monsieur de Boismorel, into his daughter’s *petite retraite* and permitted him to leaf through her *Oeuvres de jeune fille*.³⁵ Upon learning of this invasion of her domain, Manon is furious. In describing her bitter resentment at the assault on her privacy by two men, one a parent, the other a “voyeur” of sorts, Manon uses the verb *violer* (violate, break faith, rape, ravish). That which is dearest to her—that private nook, those books she loved, the pages on which she wrote her thoughts—has been profoundly violated. Her space, she objects angrily, had been trespassed, in an abuse of her trust.

When her father tries, ineffectively in Manon’s assessment, to explain and justify his act, she retorts that it was nothing short of an assault on freedom, independence, and property. The choice of words is deeply significant, revealing true Enlightenment concerns on the part of the young woman. Manon is offended because the physical and spiritual space she had created for herself in the retreat of her *petit cabinet* has been casually invaded. Monsieur Phlipon had literally led another man into his daughter’s inner sanctum, exposing what is most intimate and private in her life to the eyes and touch of an outsider. Manon’s reaction of outrage comes both from her own inviolable sense of personal and private boundaries and from her republican ideas about the sanctity of property. If the ultimate result of this specific trespass will be positive—Monsieur de Boismorel invites Manon to make use of his library, and the two of them begin what for her will be a developmentally very interesting correspondence—the fact remains that the whole episode is cast under the equivocally sexual sign of violation.

What these two examples of spatial transgression—one recounted in memoirs, the other in a painting—reveal is that the protocols of woman’s space are quite different from those of men. We cannot imagine an eighteenth-century woman boldly intruding upon the male and making assumptions about his activities and his space, for his private space is assured and legitimized by both convention and prejudice, and his study is off-limits because of the serious nature of his work. To achieve similar respect for their space and work, according to Madame de Genlis, women needed to set their sights on the ideal figure of the library, which represents not only a refuge

of the mind, a safe harbor and a retreat from the material and emotional vulgarities of the world, but also a space endowed with the ability to confer a quiet sense of power through commerce with books. To associate women's reading with the mind required equal access to the library and changing society's mind about women's activities and mental capacities. It meant opening the spaces of knowledge—the *universités*, *collèges*, and *académies*, those “lieux masculins du savoir,” as Linda Timmermans has called them.³⁶ But first it required a desexualizing of the process of reading women and the recasting of the female reader not as some delectable, mysterious, or vulnerable essence, but as a person with a serious claim to *l'espace du livre*. It would be through this space and all that it implies that a connecting bridge between two spheres as between the two sexes could be achieved. If the mind really had no sex, equal access to knowledge and equal respect for learning were not only eminently suitable to both sexes, but absolutely necessary.

To be sure, not all visual representations of women reading should be cast in a negative light. The book can, for instance, be merely a prop for the portraitist, as in Boucher's pleasing painting of Madame Boucher (Figure 7); or in Norman Ores's portrait of the artist's mother, the artist's mother, and the

Nonnotte (Figure 8), which shows the homey pleasant view of woman's reading; or in Vigée-Lebrun's famous painting of Marie-Antoinette (Figure 9), in which the written text is used to counteract the public's image of the queen as frivolous, morally corrupt, and lavishly self-indulgent. But the real staple of rococo depiction tends to equate woman's reading with her sexuality as shown in the anonymous engraving of *Amynthe à son lever* (Figure 10). Seated on a bed and still wearing her sleeping cap, Amynthe holds a book in her left



FIGURE 8. Donat Nonnotte (1708–1785), *Madame Nonnotte*, Copyright Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.



FIGURE 9. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842), *Marie-Antoinette*, Copyright Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.



FIGURE 10. Anonymous, *Amynthe à son lever*, ca. 1750, engraving, Cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

hand and appears both dreamy and distracted from the task of dressing. Her morning gown thrown open and her pert breasts spilling out from their chemise, she is at once the woman reader-under-the-influence and the woman to be read.

Other images of women readers may carry cautionary subtexts without the sly erotic wink that the subject woman and books so often evokes. For instance, in *A Girl Reading* (Figure 11), Alexis Grimou shows a female figure caught in a strong, masculine gesture, slightly hunched over her book, jaw firmly planted on her hand (not characterized by slender fingers) poised to turn the page, expressing her impatience to be left alone. The



FIGURE 11. Alexis Grimou (1679–1752), *A Girl Reading* (*La Liseuse*), 1731, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

image, while not explicitly negative, also is not particularly attractive. One might question if with the loss of sexuality, this woman reader has gained legitimacy, or whether instead there resides an admonitory message about female reading within the portrayal. What is implicit in Grimou becomes more explicit in a pair of paintings by Jean Raoux that contrast the occupations of women, in *The Vestal Virgins* (Figure 12) and *Modern Virgins* (Figure 13). Whereas vestal virgins have a common purpose and work in unison,

© 2005 State University of New York Press, Albany
This page intentionally left blank.

modern women all move in their separate pursuits. The lack of shared goals and clear evidence of disarticulated female existence in Raoux's contemporary world are suggested by the number of figures looking out from and leaving the picture and by the total self-absorption of the female reader. She is lost in a hefty tome, an indirect suggestion that the woman who reads separates herself from those traditional female endeavors that hold a community together. Such images might reasonably be seen as expressing ideas similar to those of Doctor Cabanis, who had argued that women who wish

to succeed in scholarly endeavors are not truly women, but rather “ambiguous beings who are, properly speaking, of neither sex” and who “will fail at wifely and maternal duties.”³⁷

In distinct opposition to Cabanis’s warning, Jacques-André Portail’s pen sketch entitled *Woman Reading* (Figure 14) marries woman, book, and femininity through the subject’s total absorption in the printed word and her

This page intentionally left blank.

exquisitely beautiful lacy gown. This *liseuse* is not merely posing with a prop, nor lost in contemplation and offering herself to the lascivious spectator. Rather, she is a participant in the culture of the book, only a step away from Vigée-Lebrun's *Comtesse de Cérès* (Figure 15) who takes pen in hand to create her own text. Directly engaging the viewer with her look, almost as though she were inviting us to try to call into question her activity as thinker

© 2005 State University of New York Press, Albany

This page intentionally left blank.

and writer, the Comtesse de Cérès is comfortable with the instruments of expression and uses them with grace and force. Together, these images of women offer an alternative to the vision of rococo painters, who so joyfully and ironically had located their meaning and significance in the boudoir of their imagination. For in the images by Portail and Vigée-Lebrun, *fémininité* is combined with *savoir*, *culture*, and *créativité* and their subjects represent a new ideal of women bred on an alternative dream as consumers and producers in the world of words.

In that sense, one might conclude that at last the real textualization of woman into *l'espace du livre* has begun. It is a view that will be adopted by nineteenth-century realist painters from Manet to Daumier, Fantin-Latour to Bonvin, who will demonstrate an extraordinary fondness for the theme of the reader, with the vast majority of their tableaux depicting the reader as woman—*la lectrice*—but no longer with the sly winks of their rococo predecessors.³⁸

THE PRACTICES AND PROTOCOLS OF READING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

While Robert Scholes says that the human condition can be seen as one of textuality, Robert Darnton reminds us that nothing could be more misleading than to assume that people in the past have always read as we do, or that their approach to the printed word and the book as object resembles our own.³⁹ Indeed, it is not only in matters of style and taste that readers of the past differ from us, but also in the very practices and protocols that surrounded their reading. It is for that reason that prior to exploring in subsequent chapters the figures and culture of reading that reside in women's writing, it is necessary to evoke what we know and do not know about women's reading in actual practice. That means looking at issues of female literacy and the protocols of reading—the conventions, rules, and standards—that had an impact on how and where women read in early modern France. An examination of this kind of information is necessary, first, to understand how ancien régime women read differently from us and, second, to see whether, or to what extent, it is possible to speak of a revolution in women's reading in the late eighteenth century.

FEMALE LITERACY

Rates of literacy in early modern times are extremely difficult to determine with accuracy because in good part there is little agreement about how literacy should be defined. Is literacy the ability to write and, if so, to write something other than one's name? Is it the ability to read and, if so, to read what kinds of texts? To be literate, must the individual be expected to read *and* to write or does the mastery of only one skill confer the status of literacy?

The situation is further complicated in eighteenth-century France because, as Abbé Grégoire said, at the time of the revolution at least six million Frenchmen were not francophone.⁴⁰ What that means, Martyn Lyons points out, is that for nearly a quarter of French people, the revolution was conducted in a foreign language. Moreover, since it was only from among the ranks of the French speakers that one might find people knowing how to read and write, the overall rates of literacy, even without speaking of women specifically, represented a minority of those living in France. Promotion of mass literacy, which in practical terms necessitated the use of a single language, would take several generations to achieve, especially in the rural areas where the use of Breton or various patois dominated daily life.

To be sure, the classical syllabus of primary education in France has always given reading first place, followed by writing and numbers.⁴¹ But in ancien régime France, who would be schooled? And how did geography and social class play into issues of literacy? One can say that in general the northern half of the nation was more literate than the southern part, the towns were in advance of the countryside, and that members of the elite classes were much more able to write as well as to read than those of the lower classes.⁴² Nonetheless, we should not assume that only the elite classes could read, because, according to most recent historians of culture, reading as a passive skill was more widespread than formerly assumed. Roger Chartier corrects a common misperception by pointing out that there was, in fact, an educated servant class in ancien régime France.⁴³ Furthermore, he observes that typically women outside the privileged classes might learn to read, but not to write, since writing was considered by many to be a suspect and noncollateral skill for women.⁴⁴ When the Church at last came to encouraging reading so that the faithful could have ready access to the Bible and other sacred texts, it still drew the line at writing, which it feared would lead to too much independence.⁴⁵ Thus while *writing* was an ability developed primarily among the elite, *reading* was a skill that enjoyed a larger and wider participation.

Clearly, the determination of the actual rate of literacy is highly inexact and extremely relative. In the introduction to their collection of essays in *Going Public*, Dena Goodman and Elizabeth Goldsmith state that the most generous estimates of general literacy at the end of the eighteenth century place the figures at 27 percent of Frenchwomen and 47 percent of Frenchmen.⁴⁶ But those figures refer to the percentages of the two sexes capable of signing their names, and, as most critics now agree, simply being able to sign one's name does not imply a very expressive level of literacy. The ability to form the letters of one's name says nothing about the ability to write in any meaningful way, nor to read any word other than one's own name. Hence, cultural historians now generally conclude that while percentages of signers constitute some kind of "rough composite index," typically such figures underestimate reading skills, while exaggerating those capable of writing.⁴⁷ In addi-

tion, they contend that for females even more than for men, the percentage of signers is in no way a reliable indication of the percentage of readers.

Furthermore, we must realize that signers are not necessarily either writers or readers, nor are readers automatically writers. In other words, the possession of one skill does not imply the equal possession of another. Many a simple housemaid, for instance, could read the equivalent of dime-store novels or a volume from the *bibliothèque bleue* without being able to write so much as a moderately literate letter. As we know from myriad accounts in eighteenth-century texts, the chambermaid or servant girl was often accused of “polluting the mind” of her young female charge by passing on to her some “suspect” reading material, but she almost never was capable of composing a written text to plead her innocence.

For reasons of simplicity, when I refer to female readers in general, I am speaking of any and all of them, while the writing subjects of this text come primarily from the upper bourgeoisie. There are no adequate figures that would suggest the exact dimensions of literate women—meaning those capable of reading a wide variety of texts and of writing at least a letter—in the eighteenth century. But if we use Goodman and Goldsmith’s figures, it is safe to say that we are talking about a percentage somewhere between a quarter and upwards of a third of all Frenchwomen. By the end of the century, this would mean roughly some three and a half million potential female readers, based on a population of twenty-six million, according to the figure generally attributed to the France of 1789.

ACCESS TO READING: LIBRARIES, BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

There have not, of course, always been libraries, and certainly not public libraries providing readers, regardless of status or sex, with easy access to books. In France the first so-called public library was established by Mazarin in 1644, with some 40,000 books. By 1689, that library was open two days a week for readers who were obliged to be unusually self-sufficient and even hardy, since there was no catalog to consult and the library appears to have been neither heated nor lighted.⁴⁸ By the mid-eighteenth century, the royal family became interested in establishing its own libraries for personal use, an act soon emulated by aristocrats. According to Madame de Genlis, who had ties to the royal family and who loved libraries, *la bibliothèque du roi* was the most beautiful in the world with its rare books, manuscripts, and medals. By the end of the century, according to her figures, with which L. S. Mercier agrees, it consisted of some 300,000 volumes of printed books, plus 70,000 manuscripts, 200,000 prints and engravings, 400,000 bronze medals, and 300,000 medals in gold.⁴⁹ It was, however, a pity, she opined, that this august library contained a copy of anything an author wished to deposit because, given the amount of poor writing, the result was a diminished collection. It is an opinion shared by Mercier, who began his chapter on the “Bibliothèque

du roi” by saying, “This monument to genius and to foolishness proves that the number of books is not a gauge of the riches of the human spirit. It is in but a hundred volumes that its wealth and real glory reside.”⁵⁰ The ideal library, both he and Madame de Genlis agree, should be constructed on a model of expurgation, meaning a small collection of only *good* books, whereas the architect Etienne-Louis Boullée defined the library’s function as being the *summa* of human knowledge, declaring that it should be destined for everyone’s disposal. A modern reader, however, is aware that Boullée’s inclusive pronoun “everyone” probably did not mean women.

In addition to the royal library, which few would visit, libraries in the eighteenth century were also maintained by religious orders, although their holdings were limited in subject matter, and user privileges were restricted. In the more public domain, there were *chambres de lecture*, or private reading clubs, with initiation and yearly fees, where male members came to read and converse in comfortable, well-lit surroundings.⁵¹ And in Paris, the 1700s saw the establishment of eighteen *bibliothèques publiques*, most of which had very limited hours of public access.⁵² But the eighteenth-century practice that truly increased the consumption of books in the public arena was the extension and establishment of the much frequented *cabinets de lecture*, located on the same premises as a bookseller’s main commercial enterprise. Dating from 1756, some *cabinets* defined their prospective users as “hommes de lettres” or scholars, and offered to these patrons, in return for a monthly sum of about three *livres*, the opportunity to read novels, travel books, philosophical essays, political pamphlets, or erotic works.⁵³ With a particularly popular book, like *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, a common practice was to divide the text into sections and demand an hourly rental fee of 12 sous, per volume.⁵⁴ In addition to these standard sources for formal and public reading, male readers also had the opportunity during their perambulations in town to come into contact with a great deal of unofficial printed materials, such as the “portable” book or document—the *canard*, *libelle*, or *placard*—that were passed out on the street corner or nailed onto a wall.

These were, however, the public spaces of *male* reading. Woman’s opportunities for reading were vastly more circumscribed in the public domain. Indeed, her reading would almost necessarily be restricted to the private holdings in her own home, whose size and makeup depended on the family’s fortune and general level of cultivation. Or she might borrow books from friends or extended family, a particularly important means of obtaining reading materials, given the cost of books.⁵⁵ Chartier observes that during the second half of the seventeenth century in Paris, the threshold of 100 works was rarely reached by merchants or bourgeois, whereas one out of every two noblemen had such collections, and the libraries of *gens de robe* were at least this large.⁵⁶ In the case of Manon Phlipon, whose reading habits will be the subject of the next chapter, we never learn how many books her father owned (except that she characterizes his collection as a “petite bibliothèque”),

nor, once she was married, how many volumes might have constituted her own private library, but we do know that she had access to books throughout her life, obtained, as she says, occasionally through rental, but primarily from various benefactors who invited her to borrow copiously from their private collections.

Furthermore, unlike their male counterparts, women readers rarely had the opportunity to belong to a community of readers or to enjoy the kind of intellectual camaraderie (or competition) that access and membership in such institutions bring. Few women had the opportunity to discuss their reading with qualified tutors, though some tell us that they might engage a father or a priest or perhaps a visiting guest in such discussions, but rarely, it appears, another woman, except possibly a mother. We do not know of any exclusively female literary societies, such as proliferated among male readers, from mid-century forward, though it is possible that some of the prerevolutionary women's clubs may have done group readings. But for the most part, these *clubs patriotiques de femmes* were primarily for political discussion and action, not for reading, and in any event they were dissolved after the revolution since women's clubs were judged to be discordant with the new civil society envisioned by male authorities. Unlike men's reading, women's was private, nearly exclusively domestic, and accessed largely through the resources of family or friends.

One might speculate, however, that it is precisely this private, intimate aspect of woman's reading that would make it easier for the journalists of the feminine press and writers like Madame Riccoboni and Madame de Genlis to win their female reader's attention and respect. It does not, however, necessarily follow that women reading in the privacy of their homes were the silent, isolated readers of times past. For a new relationship of reader to book was being developed, one that had been initiated by Rousseau who had asked people to read with heart and soul. Once that happened, once readers discovered that books could offer wise counsel about the world, as well as self-knowledge through Proust's "poetry of the inner life," they also came to understand that thousands of others like them were having similar experiences with printed culture. Shared interests through reading would create new communities that would have a major impact on the social contract.

Progressive women of the eighteenth century were persuaded that reading could play a major role in the promotion of a new vision of the self-empowered woman. This is why, in opposition to the gendered theories of reading in vogue, women writers would propose models of ethical reading in which the female reader would no longer be the guilty or docile recipient of male ideas—the one who read passively for mere pleasure—but rather the responsible consumer and, ultimately, producer of texts and ideas. Woman's *reading*, then, was important not so much because political speech was forbidden to her, but because reading was perceived as the primary activity by which women's self-education would take place. Domestic reading did not have to be trivial. Instead, it could be empowering, a means of finding

friendship, joining a community, and of being challenged to improve. For women to read in this way, was revolutionary.

A READING REVOLUTION

When historians have used the notion of a revolution in reading, they have referred to a number of major changes in the way people have read in the past. They have pointed, for instance, to the passage from oral reader to silent reader as an important milestone, which brought about the privatization of reading.⁵⁷ Others, such as a number of German scholars, have argued that as of 1750 there was a *lese revolution*, consisting in a change from the tradition of *intensive* reading—reading few books, but reading them again and again, as one might with the Bible—to *extensive* reading—reading widely, given the growing availability of reading materials including the chapbook and almanac, in addition to novels, periodicals, and philosophical and political works.⁵⁸ And finally, scholars have studied how a single influential writer, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, brought about profound changes in the way people read by calling on them to approach the printed page with an open heart and soul and in total absorption, so that they could bring the text of their reading into the text of their lives.⁵⁹

But no one has spoken of the possibility of another more specific revolution—that of the role that reading was to play in the lives and ultimate empowerment of women. And yet to do so may be to avoid the horns of the dilemma for scholars of eighteenth-century women's history who must refrain from merely reinscribing the futility of the efforts to advance the cause of women under the *ancien régime*, and from overplaying the role of women as subversive *résistantes* to the status quo. By concentrating, instead, on the culture of women's reading and its issues, I believe that we may both recapture the concerns of a sizeable group of women—far more than those relatively few involved in political action or resistance—and tap into some important ways in which eighteenth-century women were different from us. We may also recenter the argument of women's history by suggesting how reading and the rhetorical spaces of reading will play a major role. To address women's history from within the specific frame of reading has the benefit of including a far greater proportion of the female population in eighteenth-century France—even while admittedly not the majority—and of joining eighteenth-century women's concerns with the most universalistic of Enlightenment aims: the promotion of literacy and education.

All the women of this book read and wrote throughout their lives; indeed, one might conclude that, based on their own experience, they could not imagine living without these two activities. In the following chapters, we will see how two individual women became readers and in fact made themselves into female intellectuals. And we will consider how they came to see reading and writing as interrelated activities, each honing the skills of the

other. These women wrote letters and essays, and fiction and fairy tales, memoirs and history, texts they intended to publish and texts that were meant for themselves. And they read. Inveterate practitioners of the "reader's craft," they did not reject male models of good writing, but they did reject the view of reading in which women were cast either as seductresses or the seduced. For reading, they believed, should be neither a seduction, nor a voyeuristic spectacle. It should enlighten and, when possible, ennoble rather than exploit the reader. It should help women live by promoting virtue and responsibility. Because reading was so important to them, they could not help writing texts in which structures and figures of reading play essential roles.

In their fiction, they did not always provide their heroines with new possibilities for adventure. And it is true that their female protagonists are often much less adventurous than they themselves, and do not, like Isabelle de Charrière or Madame Riccoboni, take on lovers twenty years younger or, like Madame de Genlis, have extramarital affairs. But this, I believe, is directly related to their sense of responsible reading. Most female writers inscribe an ideal of feminine virtue in their texts, not because they are dim-witted or hopelessly idealistic, but because they consider that the objective of women's reading should be for self-improvement and enlightenment. The models they present to women within their texts are intended to help the reader cope with life and also to bring out the best in herself. These writers did not aim to incite their readers to demand new public roles in the public sphere, but to come to value themselves as autonomous individuals, who live in intimacy with others to whom they have responsibility, but for whom they do not have to sacrifice their own sense of self. That is certainly an important message. Simply because eighteenth-century women were not a part of the political fabric, and did not have the kinds of public roles of women today, does not mean that they had no role in remaking society or contributing to Enlightenment ideals.

The women writers of this book did not define their struggle for respect in terms of access to public spaces and participation in policy-making; they did not see the politics of state and society as their highest calling. But they are, nonetheless, part of a quiet revolution. Their revolutionary project was focused on centerpiecing a program of moral improvement through acquisition of a new kind of knowledge, including self-knowledge, through reading. It was a project that would have revolutionary impact on the culture of the book. More women would read more books, and as accounts from Mesdames Roland and Genlis show, their reading would be both intensive (favorite authors were read again and again) and extensive (they were voracious readers of everything they could get their hands on). It would be women readers, moreover, who would turn novels into bestsellers and make publishing into a reader-driven business. And they would participate in the early development of reading for practical knowledge in everyday life, as, for instance, when teachers such as Madame Leprince de Beaumont and Madame de

Genlis answered the public's developing thirst for books that would help parents educate and raise their children with volumes or essays on pedagogical theory.

The history of women's relationship to *l'espace du livre* as readers and consumers has often been overlooked in Enlightenment history. Yet the evidence suggests that many thousands of eighteenth-century women had integrated the Enlightenment ideal of self-enlightenment into their lives and acted on the belief that the written text was important not merely as entertainment, but as a practical resource in structuring a meaningful life and in living in relationship to family or friends and the larger society. Surely, then, it is possible to speak of a revolution—a quiet one, perhaps, but a revolution, nonetheless.