

Natalia Zorrilla Sirlin

### **Contempt as an Epistemic Emotion in Louise Dupin's *Des Femmes***

From 1743 to 1751, Louise-Marie-Madeleine Guillaume de Fontaine, better known as Louise Dupin (1706-1799), worked on a salient essay on the equality between men and women. This extensive but unfinished work, subtitled “Observations physiques, historiques et Morales du préjugé commun sur la différence des sexes”, remained unpublished during her lifetime. In late 2022, Frédéric Marty published the first modern edition of this text after consulting the dispersed manuscripts of Mme Dupin. Nonetheless, as Marty explains, this edition cannot be considered definitive, given that the manuscripts of various articles are yet to surface.

In her defense of women’s and men’s equality, the chatelaine of Chenonceau employs diverse strategies. Initially, she undermines the idea that the differences between the sexes are significant in an intellectual or physical sense, thus denaturalizing the belief prevalent in her time that women’s worth is inferior to men’s. Secondly, she endeavors to demonstrate that women have historically occupied positions of power and authority across different geographical regions and time periods, only to be gradually marginalized from such positions. Dupin perceives the unequal conditions and status of women in society as a relatively recent phenomenon, stemming from pervasive prejudices propagated by the androcentric intellectual discourse of her era, reinforced by socio-political factors such as education, cultural norms, unfavorable legislation, and others.

Dupin's project involves a thorough examination of a myriad of philosophical, literary, and historical sources that aim to establish women’s inferiority. According to the author of *Des femmes*, they promote a widespread contempt (*mépris*) for women (pp. 214-215; p. 395). The coarse bias in these misogynistic sources fuels contempt in Dupin herself as a feminist intellectual (p. 184). In my paper, I will examine how contempt functions as an epistemic emotion in Dupin’s philosophical reflections, prompting her to propose a regulative epistemology—a set of methodological guidelines for the philosophical and historical analysis of sources—. These guidelines serve a dual purpose: on one hand, they are useful to recognize the contempt that undergirds misogynistic ideas and that thus distorts what should be a reasoned analysis or a historical account concerning different aspects of the woman question. On the other, they help transform the contemptuous reaction elicited by these adverse sources into a quest for knowledge. As Macalester Bell (2013) explains, contempt entails regarding someone as falling below our personal moral baseline, thereby subjecting them to vilification and rendering them as devoid of worth. Contempt typically motivates withdrawal, whereas anger tends to provoke active involvement, as it arises from a sense of being wronged by another’s actions. Instead of disengaging and succumbing to silence, Dupin strives to overcome vilification both externally and internally, by relying on reason and trusting her capacity as a “knower”.

Preventing women from accessing education and engaging in knowledge production marginalizes them hermeneutically. It contributes to the silencing of any potential complaints about sex or gender-based inequality, but more importantly, it hinders the identification of those inequalities as sex or gender-motivated. Women are not able to defend their own interests against sexist assertions, according to Dupin, because they lack the intellectual and emotional resources to do so, due to the fact that their gendered education has kept them ignorant. From my perspective, these feminist claims Dupin puts forth can be understood through the lens of what Miranda Fricker (2007) defines as “hermeneutical injustice”, i.e., as knowers, women lack interpretive resources to make sense of certain experiences they undergo, due to a systemically enforced identity prejudice that excludes them from actively participating in knowledge production and dissemination. I argue that Dupin’s resignification of contempt as an epistemic emotion raises broader questions within feminist theory regarding how to respond to misogynistic discrimination, epistemic discreditation, and contempt while cultivating egalitarian bonds in the process. What are the argumentative and philosophical strategies required to counter misogynistic attacks while preserving and fostering the pursuit of truth that underpins intellectual endeavors?