



The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment

Dena Goodman

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In the first major reinterpretation of the French Enlightenment in twenty years, Dena Goodman moves beyond the traditional approach to the Enlightenment as a chapter in Western intellectual history and examines its deeper significance as cultural history. She finds the very epicenter of the Enlightenment in a community of discourse known as the Republic of Letters, where salons governed by women advanced the Enlightenment project "to change the common way of thinking." Goodman details the history of the Republic of Letters in the Parisian salons, where men and women, philosophes and salonnières, together not only introduced reciprocity into intellectual life through the practices of letter writing and polite conversation but also developed a republican model of government that was to challenge the monarchy. Providing a new understanding of women's importance in the Enlightenment, Goodman demonstrates that in the Republic of Letters men and women played complementary - and unequal - roles. Salonnières governed the Republic of Letters by enforcing rules of polite conversation that made possible a discourse characterized by liberty and civility. Goodman chronicles the story of the Republic of Letters from its earliest formation through major periods of change: the production of the Encyclopedia, the proliferation of a print culture that widened circles of readership beyond the control of salon governance, and the early years of the French Revolution. Although the legacy of the Republic of Letters remained a force in French cultural and political life, in the 1780s men formed new intellectual institutions that asserted their ability to govern themselves and that marginalized women. The Republic of Letters introduces provocative explanations both for the failure of the Enlightenment and for the role of the Enlightenment in the French Revolution.

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