

## **Amalia Holst**

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*Abstract:* Amalia Holst's writings expose a paradox at the heart of the German Enlightenment. While philosophers made significant gains in unearthing the social conditions of human freedom, they failed to advance either the political status or the education of women. Holst's major work, *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Development* (*Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung*, 1802), was the first text to criticize the Enlightenment project from a woman's standpoint and to advance the improvement of women's education from Enlightenment principles. In this chapter I examine Holst's conception of the ungendered mind as an attempt to vindicate woman's equal share in the human vocation while accommodating socially defined norms. To grasp the philosophical importance of Holst's arguments, I argue, we must not simply unearth her striking critique of the Enlightenment but also situate her response within the challenges facing female philosophers in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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The neglect of Amalia Holst's (1758-1829) contribution to nineteenth-century German philosophy is striking. In recent years, scholars have attempted to reclaim Holst as Germany's Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>1</sup> While this portrayal sheds light on the weight and orientation of her arguments, it dramatically misrepresents her historical influence. Following its original publication, Holst's major work, *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Development* (*Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung*, 1802), received just a handful of reviews, none of which acknowledges the merits of her project or takes her arguments seriously.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which reached a third edition just four years after publication, Holst's *On the Vocation of Woman* did not outstrip its original print run. Indeed, it was not recognized as a significant feminist text until the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> nor was it republished until Berta Rahm's revised edition in 1983. As we become increasingly aware of the exclusion of women in the historiography of German philosophy, Holst's writings provide further evidence that the absence of female voices has little to do with the availability of philosophical works by women. To use Sabrina Ebbersmeyer arresting words, it has far more to do with a deliberate 'attempt to keep women out of academia in general and out of philosophy in particular.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Berta Rahm, 'Nachwort', in *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung*, ed. Berta Rahm, (Zürich: ALA Verlag, 1983), 153; Carol Strauss Sotiropoulos, 'Scandal Writ Large in the Wake of the French Revolution: The Case of Amalia Holst', *Women in German Yearbook* 20 (2004): 107-108; Andrea Gerhardt, *Wenn die Frau Mensch Wird. Campe, Holst und Hippel im Vergleich* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2017), 84.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see the reviews written for *Kaiserlich-Privilegirte* and *Hamburg und Altona* considered in Section Four.

<sup>3</sup> Gertrud Bäumer was the first to acknowledge Holst as an important figure in the history of German feminism in Volume 1 of *Handbuch der Frauenbewegung* (Berlin: Moeser, 1901).

<sup>4</sup> Sabrina Ebbersmeyer, 'From a "memorable place" to "drops in the ocean": on the marginalization of women philosophers in German historiography of philosophy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 28, no. 3 (2020): 444. See also Eileen O'Neill, 'Early Modern Women Philosophers and the History of Philosophy', *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 186.

This chapter has two aims. The first is to reconstruct Holst's arguments within debates concerning the human vocation in the German Enlightenment at the turn of the nineteenth century. The second is to discern how Holst's argument in *On the Vocation of Woman* responds to the challenges facing female philosophers in nineteenth-century Germany. Holst's writings, I argue, expose a paradox at the heart of the German Enlightenment. While philosophers made significant gains in unearthing the social conditions of human freedom, they mostly failed to advance either the political status or the education of women.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the terrors of the French Revolution prompted a conservative backlash across the German speaking states, which saw a widening gap between egalitarian rhetoric and substantive gains for women. This backlash was partly staged through a proliferation of works – exclusively by men – on the vocation of woman (*die Bestimmung des Weibes*). Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* was dubbed a pro-revolutionary text that undermined the natural complementarity of the sexes and the hereditary succession of royal authority.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing that the Enlightenment project, when left in the hands of one sex, leads to an imbalance of power, Holst took it upon herself to consider the female vocation from a woman's standpoint. The difficulties facing her attempt, however, reveal the gendered nature of public reason. In contrast to Wollstonecraft, whose arguments were aligned with the theories of right advocated by British reformers such as Edmund Burke, Holst was forced to adopt a range of rhetorical strategies simply to establish the legitimacy of her standpoint as a woman.

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<sup>5</sup> Sotiropoulos, 'Scandal Writ Large', 98. An exception here is Theodor von Hippel, who anonymously published two radical works in which he attempted to redefine the social role of women, such that they might carry equal membership in marriage and even hold public offices and pursue careers. However, the satirical style of Hippel's work did not engage with contemporary doctrine and was thus unable to open new possibilities for women from within existing conditions. See [Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel], *Über die Ehe*, 3rd Edition (Berlin: Voss, 1792); *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* (Berlin: Voßischen Buchhandlung, 1792).

<sup>6</sup> One of the leaders of the philanthropinist movement, Christoph Meiners, described Wollstonecraft as an 'obstinate enemy to princes and nobility.' Christoph Meiners, *Geschichte des weiblichen Geschlechts*, 4 Vols. (Hannover, 1788-1800), IV 243. For further discussion of Wollstonecraft's reception in Germany, see Eileen Hunt Botting, 'Nineteenth-Century Critical Reception', in *Mary Wollstonecraft in Context*, ed. Nancy E. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 51; 'Wollstonecraft in Europe, 1792–1904', *History of European Ideas* 39, no. 4 (2013): 514-515.

The chapter is divided into five sections. In Section One I begin with a brief sketch of Holst's background in Hamburg in the late eighteenth century. In Section Two I survey the extensive body of literature on the human vocation, highlighting a growing anxiety among male Enlightenment concerning the learnedness of women. In Section Three I locate Holst's *On the Vocation of Woman* within the proliferation of texts in the 1780s and 90s that aimed to define a distinctively female vocation. In Section Four I examine her notion of the ungendered mind as an attempt to vindicate woman's equal share in the human vocation while accommodating socially defined norms. I conclude in Section Five with some remarks on the reception of Holst's work in the historiography of German philosophy. To grasp the philosophical importance of Holst's arguments, I argue, we must not simply unearth her striking critique of the Enlightenment but also situate her response within the challenges facing female philosophers in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century.

### *1. A Practical Teacher*

Little is known about Holst's biography beyond the bare details found in several obituaries and bibliographical entries. She was born in Altona on February 10, 1758 to Johann Friedrich Gottlob von Justi and Johanna Maria Magdalena Merchand.<sup>7</sup> Von Justi was a chief mining inspector for the Prussian states and a financial expert in the management of state property. In addition to his formal role in public service, he was a progressive thinker and restless activist, he campaigned for women's academies and civil courts administered and elected by female officials, and ensured that his daughters received a learned education.<sup>8</sup> Berta Rahm describes von Justi as 'an extraordinarily versatile and indefatigably active author,

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Brüssow, 'Amalie Holst, née von Justi', *Neuer Nekrolog der Deutschen* (Ilmenau, 1831), 63.

<sup>8</sup> *Freimütiges Abendblatt* (Rostock, 1829), no. 557, 741.

translator, editor, cameralist, professor, and promoter of technology and science.<sup>9</sup> Yet a difficult chapter unfolded for the family when von Justi was accused of embezzling state funds. While the accusations were never substantiated, he died as a prisoner in Küstrin when Amalia was thirteen. All that is known of Amalia's adult life is that she moved to Hamburg in 1791, married Dr Johann Ludolf Holst in 1792 at the age of thirty-three, and had three children: Emilie, Mariane, and Eduard.<sup>10</sup> Johann Holst was a lawyer, and directed a pedagogical institute in Hamburg-St Georg. From 1792 to 1802, Amalia was headmistress of the preschool her husband directed, and went on to establish three schools for girls (*Erziehungsinstitute*) in Boizenburg, Hamburg, and Parchim. She left Hamburg for Parchim in 1813, and her husband died in 1825. Holst spent her final years with her son Eduard on the river Elbe in Greater Timkenberg, where she died 'quietly and gently' in 1829, 71 years old.<sup>11</sup>

Holst clearly imbibed her father's independent thought and tenacious drive for reform. She dedicated her life to the education of young women and wrote several reactionary texts against a progressive group of Enlightenment known as the philanthropinists (*Menschenfreunde*). Philanthropinism was a movement for pedagogical reform pioneered by Johann Bernhard Basedow, whose influential text *Elementarwerk* (1774) and model school in Dessau (the Philanthropin) advanced a method of education that sought to foster the natural order of a child's cognitive development. Basedow chastised the 'astonishing abundance of disgusting verbal cognition [*Verbalerkenntnis*] promoted in the schools, which force the student's natural faculties into an arcane mould 'without reality.'<sup>12</sup> He drew instead from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to argue that education must begin with 'the natural order of cognition',

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<sup>9</sup> Rahm, 'Nachwort', 160.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Brüssow, 'Amalie Holst, née von Justi', 64.

<sup>11</sup> *Das Lexikon der hamburgischen Schriftsteller*, ed. Hans Schröder, (Hamburg, 1857), 331.

<sup>12</sup> Johann Bernhard Basedow, *Ausgewählte pädagogische Schriften*, ed. A. Reble (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1965), 26.

which begins with sense perception, extends to the rational ordering of ideas, and culminates in the public use of words to express those ideas.<sup>13</sup> Joachim Heinrich Campe, who worked briefly with Basedow at Dessau before starting his own experimental school in Hamburg, argued that a school's curriculum should not be grounded on an abstract, logical system of words but on the concrete human vocation 'to make oneself and others happy through the proper training and application of all one's powers and abilities in the circle in which and for which Providence has caused him to be born.'<sup>14</sup> The teacher must have a firm understanding of those powers and abilities to construct a classroom conducive to their growth.

Holst's first published work was an anonymous essay entitled *Observations on the Errors of Our Modern Education (Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer Modernen Erziehung von einer Praktischen Erzieherin,* 1791), in which she presents the first critique of philanthropinism by a woman.<sup>15</sup> In her direct and combative style, she introduces herself as a 'practical teacher [*praktische Erzieherin*]' who, while supporting the pedagogical shift toward a focus on the student's natural capacities, finds the philanthropinists incapable of applying their theory in practice. Holst contends that Basedow and Campe inherit an error from Rousseau, who provided an incisive vision of a child's capacity for learning only to claim that education should be (a) limited, so as not to tarnish the child's natural dispositions, and (b) gendered, for physiology determines a distinct sphere of influence for members of each sex.<sup>16</sup> While she affirms Rousseau's claim that the student's natural capacities should determine his or her educational needs, Holst argues that a practical teacher knows that she must not

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<sup>13</sup> Basedow, *Ausgewählte pädagogische Schriften*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Johann Heinrich Campe, *Väterlicher Rath für meine Tochter* (Braunschweig, 1789), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Helen Fronius, *Women and Literature in the Goethe Era, 1770-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 206.

<sup>16</sup> [Amalia Holst], *Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer modernen Erziehung von einer praktischen Erzieherin. Herausgegeben vom Verfasser des Siegfried von Lindenbergs [Johann Gottwerth Müller]* (Leipzig: Carl Friedrich Schneider, 1791), 32.

anticipate the student's needs in advance, for she is aware that it takes several years to allow the student's genius to emerge on its own particular course.<sup>17</sup> The gendered 'reading books' composed by Basedow and Campe purport to offer everything a boy or girl needs in regards to 'morality, religion, political science, psychology, criticism and the fine arts.'<sup>18</sup> Yet they are poor substitutes for an attentive teacher who herself has a mastery of the sciences, and is able to introduce their fundamental principles at the right moment and in a manner fitting with a student's particular needs. Holst claims that such books offer a mere scaffold of the sciences, and deaden rather than excite the student's natural capacity for learning.

The editor of *Observations*, Johann Gottwerth Müller, recognized the explosive nature of Holst's argument. He included a preface in which he defends her position while distancing himself from the content of the text:

If she is right, then the public owes her a debt of gratitude, that she has so candidly shared her observations and doubts. If she is wrong, then the builders and guardians of the new system of education gain all the more strength from it, if they can make her errors evident. In both cases she deserves to be heard, and all the more so, for, as a practical teacher [*als praktische Erzieherinn*], she is entitled to a voice.<sup>19</sup>

Müller saw that Holst's observations of child development and her extensive experience in applying pedagogical methodologies led her to emphasize common human capacities before the physiological considerations of sex. On such grounds, the classroom should be

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<sup>17</sup> [Holst], *Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer Modernen Erziehung*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> [Holst], *Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer Modernen Erziehung*, 38-39.

<sup>19</sup> Johann Gottwerth Müller, 'Vorrede des Herausgebers', in [Amalia Holst], *Bemerkungen über die Fehler unserer modernen Erziehung von einer praktischen Erzieherin* (Leipzig: Carl Friedrich Schneider, 1791), 4-5.

coeducational and organized in a manner that does not follow a prescribed curriculum but that cultivates the particular capabilities of each student.

In 1799, Holst published a series of letters in *Lindemann's Musarion* in which she criticizes Karoline von Wobeser popular novel *Elisa, or the woman as she ought to be (Elisa, oder das Weib wie es seyn sollte, 1795)*. Wobeser was a champion of women's education, and lamented the current educational opportunities afforded to women. 'Half-enlightenment is always harmful,' she states in the forward to her novel, 'but why should women always be half-enlightened?'<sup>20</sup> Yet Holst contends that the novel itself fails to challenge the actual social status of women, endorsing instead a passive resignation to present conditions. Elisa, having renounced her lover in favor of the unloved Wallenheim, devotes herself unwaveringly to him despite his unjust whims and unfaithful conduct. While she relinquishes all hope of material happiness, she dies in the consciousness of her absolute virtue as a faithful wife. Holst praises von Wobeser's depiction of Elisa's impassioned sense of duty despite the context of an unhappy domestic life. Yet she criticizes her portrayal of Elisa's self-renunciation and calls instead for female independence. Praising Rousseau's depiction of Julie in *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*, Holst argues that a woman's self-realization must be a public act, involving a confrontation with social norms.

Holst's rhetorical creativity, and her frustration with the barriers confronting women's education, culminates in *On the Vocation of Woman to Higher Intellectual Development (Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung, 1802)*. This is a landmark text in the history of German philosophy, not simply because it is one of the first works of philosophy published under a woman's name, but also because it is the first to advocate that women's education should not be grounded in the particular circumstances of her sex but in her common

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<sup>20</sup> [Wilhelmine Caroline von Wobeser], *Elisa, oder das Weib, wie es seyn sollte* (Leipzig 1795), xi.

humanity. Before we turn to Holst's argument, however, it is important to situate the text within a broader debate concerning the human vocation.

## 2. Education and the Vocation of Woman

The *Bestimmung* debate was a defining event of the German Enlightenment.<sup>21</sup> The celebrated philosophers of the movement – including Mendelssohn, Kant, Herder, and Fichte – called on the concept of vocation to redefine the rights of humanity according to what can be vindicated by reason. The debate originated in Johann Spalding's *Consideration of the Vocation of the Human Being* (*Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen*, 1748), which was reprinted eleven times during his lifetime. Spalding defends the rational faith of the Enlightenment, claiming that what one should do with one's life ought to be determined as an instance of *Selbstdenken*. His aim is to couch the project of autonomy in shared anthropological conditions, such that the highest good of a human life involves the perfection of the capacities (*Fähigkeiten*) given by nature.<sup>22</sup> The task of the philosopher is to identify the stages of formation (*Bildung*) through which one must progress on the way to maturity, including a shift from morality to religion and reason.

Spalding's *Consideration* placed the question of education at the centre of the German Enlightenment. For the philanthropinists, the project of Enlightenment demands a radically new pedagogy capable of realizing the project of self-thinking as a social and political reality. Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (*Émile, ou De l'éducation*, 1762), translated into German

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Preuss, 'Translator's Introduction', in J. G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), vii-xiv; John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 165-171; David James, 'Fichte on the Vocation of the Scholar and the (Mis)Use of History', *The Review of Metaphysics* 63, no. 3 (2010): 539-566; Michael Printy, 'The Determination of Man: Johann Joachim Spalding and the Protestant Enlightenment', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74, no. 2 (2014): 189-212.

<sup>22</sup> Johann Joachim Spalding, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen, die Erstausgabe von 1748 und die letzte Aufklage von 1794* (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1997), 82.

in 1762 (*Emile oder Über die Erziehung*), provided the backdrop against which their case was staged.<sup>23</sup> In the first four books of *Emile*, Rousseau examines the proper education of Emile to illustrate the pedagogical implications of his philosophy. His famous opening lines indicate that nature provides the authoritative grounds for education: ‘Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.’<sup>24</sup> While this entails that education should not be entirely mediated by books and scholarship, Rousseau accepts that Emile, as natural man, must nevertheless learn to live in society. While the normative foundation of his rationality is rooted in nature, the cultural sphere serves to realize and direct his natural capacities. In book five, Rousseau turns to the education of Sophie, Emile’s future wife. ‘In everything not connected with sex,’ he states, ‘woman is man.’<sup>25</sup> To the extent that they share the same organs and bodily needs, men and women are equal. Yet he then asserts that nature has fixed a complementarity between the sexes: ‘In everything connected with sex, woman and man are in every respect related and in every respect different.’<sup>26</sup> The difficulty of comparing men and women thus ‘comes from the difficulty of determining what in their constitution is due to sex and what is not.’ Rousseau draws the line according to physiology, claiming that Sophie’s education must be oriented toward the duties determined by her reproductive capacities, which is her ‘proper purpose’; or, in the 1762 German translation, her ‘ureigene Bestimmung [very own vocation].’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ulrich Hermann, *Aufklärung und Erziehung: Studien zur Funktion der Erziehung im Konstitutionsprozeß der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert in Deutschland* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1993), 99.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 37.

<sup>25</sup> Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, 357.

<sup>26</sup> Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, 357.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile oder über die Erziehung* (Berlin, 1762), 417-18.

While the *Bestimmung* debate has gained extensive attention in the literature, scholars seldom note that the rights afforded to the human being were not extended to women. Rousseau's natural determination of woman's own vocation appealed to philosophers in Germany who were concerned by the revolutionary social change occurring in France. The final decade of the eighteenth century saw an explosion of texts by the leading philanthropinists on the particular vocation of woman, including Ernst Brandes' *On Women* (*Über die Weiber*, 1787), Christoph Meiners *History of the Female Sex* (*Geschichte der weiblichen Geschlecht*, 1788-1802), Campe's *Fatherly Advice for my Daughter* (*Väterlicher Rath für meine Tochter*, 1789), Johann Ludwig Ewald's *The Art of Becoming a Good Girl, Wife, Mother and Housewife* (*Die Kunst, ein gutes Mädchen, eine gute Gattin, Mutter und Hausfrau zu werden*, 1802) and Karl Friedrich Pockels' *Characteristics of the Female Sex* (*Versuch einer Charakteristik des weiblichen Geschlechts*, 1797-1802). These texts staged what Carol Sotiropoulos describes as a 'conservative reaction' against the social upheaval of the late-eighteenth century, seeking to show that the particularities of sex entail that women must adopt a subordinate role to men.<sup>28</sup> Thus, despite disagreeing on the matter of female learnedness, they ultimately affirm the tenor of Wobeser's *Elisa*: education must enable women to bear their particular duties with grace and self-composure. Neither Wobeser nor the philanthropinists advocate for an actual change in these conditions.

While the texts on female vocation exhibit a shift toward an essentialist account of gender, they simultaneously betray a growing anxiety about the changing conditions of citizen society. In *Fatherly Advice*, for instance, Campe follows Rousseau by asserting that women are bearers of *two* vocations, 'one *general* and one *particular*, one as *human being* and one as *woman*'.<sup>29</sup> While the general vocation is grounded in her rational capacities as a human, her

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<sup>28</sup> Sotiropoulos, 'Scandal Writ Large', 113.

<sup>29</sup> Campe, *Väterlicher Rath*, 5.

particular vocation is grounded in her physiology (her ‘sickly constitution’), which renders her unfit for strenuous study. Physiology should form a pillar of female education, for it demonstrates that men not only have larger muscles and stronger nerves but ‘also the unmistakable predispositions to a larger, more far-sighted and more comprehensive mind.’<sup>30</sup> In *On Women*, Brandes presents ‘a detailed and rational account of the vocation and capacities of the female sex,’ which is grounded in the physiology of sexual difference.<sup>31</sup> His anxiety with the shifting social conditions is evident in his attack on the supposedly false culture of the times, which bestows on women a dangerous sense of self-importance. Education must take the role of correcting the misguided social habits of women, for ‘in vain one resists recognizing the truth that woman exists for the sake of man.’<sup>32</sup> Pockels’ five-volume *Characteristics of the Female Sex* combines the latest work in the anatomical, anthropological and psychological sciences to show that women’s education should be focused on the three parts of her vocation:

It is just as absurd to imagine a female philosopher as it is to imagine a woman standing in rank as a soldier. The vocation of a woman is to become a wife, a mother, and a housewife, in fact, a pure wife, a perfect mother, and a prudent housewife. It is to this end that girls must study. Everything that does not contribute to her vocation leads away from it, and makes her an unnatural sight.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Campe, *Väterlicher Rath*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Brandes, *Über die Weiber* (Leipzig, 1787), 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Brandes, *Ueber die Weiber*, 83.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Friedrich Pockels, *Versuch einer Charakteristik des weiblichen Geschlechts. Ein Sittengemälde des Menschen, des Zeitalters und des geselligen Lebens*, 5 Vols (Hannover, 1797-1802), II 332.

The writings of Campe, Brandes, and Pockels affirm Michel Foucault's observation that the power of discourse is established through performative repetition to ensure its hegemony.<sup>34</sup> While this power was exercised in multi-volume books written exclusively by men, the growing popularity of journals in the late-eighteenth century provided women with a forum from which to expose the fragility of that discourse. A powerful example can be found in a two-part essay published anonymously in the *Teutscher Merkur* in 1791, entitled 'Some Characteristics and Principles Necessary for Happiness in Marriage' ('Ueber einige zum Glück der Ehe notwendige Eigenschaften und Grundsätze'). The essay consists of a letter from a married woman to her sister, soon to be married. While much of the advice is conventional, its author (now known to be Emilie von Berlepsch) includes an attack on the philanthropinists' pernicious influence on gender relations. Berlepsch cites from recent texts on the female vocation, particularly Brandes' *On Women*, to present society's low esteem for women as a form of 'misogyny [*misogynie*].'<sup>35</sup> She contends that the 'negative consequences of this misogynist tone on society and morals in general cannot be doubted ... but their influence on the happiness of marriage, as unerring as it is, will perhaps be recognized by many.' Misogyny contaminates the minds of husbands, making it impossible for women to take personal satisfaction in their traditional duties. To resist the growing constraints on female happiness in marriage, Berlepsch redeploys the prevailing Enlightenment discourse by calling for women's 'independence [*Selbstständigkeit*].'<sup>36</sup> If the current social conditions are to be challenged, women must learn to 'stand alone' and develop a critical 'way of thinking.'<sup>37</sup> While her solution is one of mitigation rather than social reform, Berlepsch's argument nevertheless

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<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), 111.

<sup>35</sup> [Emilie von Berlepsch], 'Ueber einige zum Glück der Ehe notwendige Eigenschaften und Grundsätze', *Neuer Teutscher Merkur*, Teil 1 (April, 1791): 83.

<sup>36</sup> [Berlepsch], 'Ueber einige zum Glück', 89.

<sup>37</sup> [Berlepsch], 'Ueber einige zum Glück', 90.

reveals the instability of gender relations at the close of the eighteenth century. If the present treatment of women is not a physiological necessity but a matter of social construction, then it can be otherwise than what it is. The power for change lies in the hands of woman, who is no longer a mere housekeeper and mother but ‘also a teacher [*Erzieherin*],’ and thus capable of shaping the future generation of citizens.<sup>38</sup>

### *3. On the Vocation of Woman*

Read in the context of the *Bestimmung* debate, Holst’s *On the Vocation of Woman* is not simply an exercise in philosophical dispute. It is a public act of confrontation, designed to expose the dynamics of power that have hitherto permitted men to elevate their claims about women’s education above the level of critique, and to redefine the female vocation from a woman’s standpoint. Holst’s awareness of her position is evident in the opening lines of the text:

In recent times, a great deal has been written about the female vocation [*die weibliche Bestimmung*]. Men have dared to set a limit that our minds may not transgress in the field of knowledge. They deem that the higher development of our understanding lies in contradiction with our individual duties. (*BW* 1/17)<sup>39</sup>

Holst focuses her attack on the claim that sexually defined duties prescribe the manner in which one participates in the human vocation. While women are constantly forced to accept the limits

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<sup>38</sup> [Emilie von Berlepsch], ‘Ueber einige zum Glück der Ehe nothwendige Eigenschaften und Grundsätze’, *Neuer Teutscher Merkur*, Teil 2 (Juni, 1791): 100-101.

<sup>39</sup> Citations to *On the Vocation of Woman* (*BW*) are in text and provide the pagination from the original version (1802) and Berta Rahm’s reprint (1983) separated by a forward slash. Amalia Holst, *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung* (Berlin, 1802); Amalia Holst, *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höhern Geistesbildung*, ed. Berta Rahm (Zürich: ALA Verlag, 1983).

of their particular standpoint, men have proved unable to acknowledge the partiality that comes with the imbalance of power:

It strikes me as a need of our times that a member of the other party – a woman – should take up this important matter about which men have, almost exclusively, already written so much. Men, when they survey our sex, are constantly partial to their own, and rarely allow justice to be done to ours. Or, if they want to be generous, they go too far indeed. Only a woman can properly assess the individual position of women in all its parts and nuances. (*BW* ix-x/15)

Holst contends that the unique standpoint available to women sheds light on the partiality of men when it comes to determining the scope of women's education. While she is reluctant to put herself forward as a representative of the female sex, she accepts that an incomplete attempt is better than ongoing silence. She thus calls on men to justify the higher civic position they assume as their own:

In the name of our sex I challenge men to justify the right they have presumed for themselves to hold back an entire half of the human race, barring them from the source of science and allowing them at most to skim its surface. (*BW* 3/18)

Despite the force of her opening demand, Holst does not launch directly into a full-blown defence of women's rights in the vein of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*. She remains committed to women's threefold calling and attempts to demonstrate that 'the fulfilment of these vocational duties [*Berufspflichten*] to the highest degree is not hindered but dignified and perfected by higher development [*die höhere Ausbildung*]'. (*BW* 2/17). The constraints upon

her as a female philosopher force Holst to adopt a range of strategies simply to carve out a legitimate position from which to make her claims. She points to influential women in history and cites letters by contemporary women to refute the sweeping generalizations made by men about the female intellect. She satirizes the arguments of her interlocutors to reveal the anxiety that lies beneath their self-appointed position. She calls on the ideal of Enlightenment to establish a standard in which arguments stand or fall before the judgment seat of reason. And she appeals to her female readers (*meine Leserinnen*) to *be* a refutation by taking up the human vocation to perfect their natural capacities.

#### *4. The Ungendered Mind*

Despite the diverse range of strategies employed in the text, Host's argument is centred on the claim that women are first and foremost members of humanity, and thus hold an equal share in the human vocation to perfect the rational capacities given by nature. This argument does not deny a meaningful difference between the sexes, but rather redefines how sexual difference bears on the human vocation. Affirming the fundamental tenant of the *Bestimmung* debate, Holst presents woman as 'a perfectible being fit for developing its faculties, both physical and moral' (*BW* 2/17). The vocation of woman *qua* human being is to develop those faculties 'in beautiful harmony to an ever-higher perfection.' Yet Holst acknowledges that woman also carries a 'gentle, amiable, and often unrewarded ... threefold calling' (*BW* 2/17). The aim of her argument is 'to prove that the higher development of woman does not contradict her threefold calling, but rather elevates and ennobles it' (*BW* 96/56).

The first step in this task is to expose an error made by the male writers, which permits them to deny women an equal share in the human vocation. Extending the argument she began in *Observations*, Holst contends that this error is to claim that 'physical strength is proportionate to mental strength' (*BW* 8/20). The only thing that physiology has shown about

sexual difference ‘is that our nerves are finer and more irritable, and our tendons are less taut than those of men’ (*BW* 7/19). The salient question is whether finer nerves and looser tendons ‘have a negative impact on the operation of our thinking, by which I mean, on the power of thought itself’ (*BW* 7/19). Holst contends that no physiologist has ever made such a claim, nor is there any empirical evidence to suggest such a connection. It is simply Rousseau who conflates mental and physical strength, infecting the philanthropinists with a false anthropology that obliterates ‘the line that separates the state of nature from civil society’ (*BW* 17/24). By doing so, he ‘proposed to drive humanity back into the state of nature, without understanding that remaining in this state was against nature’s intention’ (*BW* 14/22). This proposal halts the achievements of culture hard won in reason’s progress, revealing a failure of acknowledgement on the part of men:

If Rousseau and several other writers talk so much about the physical weakness of women, and attempt to deduce from it her subordinate status, if they claim that nature has granted to her a lower position, they misinterpret this kind mother of all beings. They carry over the natural right of raw, undeveloped human beings to the social contract of those who are ethically developed. Thus they fall into error, upheld by a failure to acknowledge the possibility of the same constitution of thinking [in the female sex]. (*BW* 21/25)

Holst contends that by prioritizing the state of nature, Rousseau enabled male writers to take physical strength as a normative foundation of right. These writers grossly miscalculate the advantages afforded by culture, which ‘outweigh, by an indescribably great measure, everything we could say in favour of the state of nature’ (*BW* 14/22). The proportionality of physical and mental strength is a baffling assumption for anyone who claims to be learned,

Holst observes, for physical strength should lose its value ‘as soon as humanity passes from the state of nature to the state of culture’ (*BW* 9/20). Through this transition we forfeit the right of violence and receive the immeasurably higher right of justice. To counter Rousseau’s influence on her contemporaries, Holst presents an alternative account of the social contract in which the transition from the state of nature to the state of culture entails a new conception of right wherein physical strength is replaced by ‘the judgment seat of sound reason [*der Richterstuhl der gesunden Vernuft*]’ (*BW* 99/57). She argues that this transition was ordained by nature all along, which intended that human beings should not remain locked in violent contagion but rather ‘develop all of their powers’ (*BW* 18/24). Once human beings have made the transition from nature to culture, rights are no longer determined by physical strength but by reason alone. The Enlightenment project can thus only be completed when members of both sexes acknowledge the same constitution of thinking in each other.

Having exposed the blatant error perpetuated by her male contemporaries, Holst then considers *why* it has been so readily made. Her answer delivers a penetrating insight into the dynamics of power: the error lies in ‘the human inclination that makes one unwilling to share rights that have been enjoyed exclusively for so long’ (*BW* 21/25). Holst’s standpoint as a woman anticipates the critical insights soon to be made by Hegel and Marx (and later by Freud and de Beauvoir), who are often celebrated as the first to unearth the ideological structure of Enlightenment self-fashioning. She explains that those who continue to claim that women are naturally unsuited to play an equal role in civic life have received their positional power due to the contingency of strength rather than the necessity of reason, ‘and men would not like to admit this’ (*BW* 26/27). The pleasure men take in their happy state entraps them in a state of self-deception, rendering them unable to realize the immeasurable advantages of culture.

Holst then seeks to counter this failure of acknowledgment by cataloguing the influence of women on the good and ill of society throughout history. Ebbersmeyer notes that the practice

of listing notable women from history became an established genre in German literature during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>40</sup> Works such as Peter Paul Finauer's *General Historical Inventory of Learned Women* (*Allgemeines historisches Verzeichnis gelehrter Frauenzimmer*, 1761) and Christian August Wichmann's *History of Famous Women* (*Geschichte berühmter Frauenzimmer*, 1772) present catalogues of learned women and female philosophers to show that dedication to study does not disqualify a woman from fulfilling her threefold duty. After the publication of Wichmann's *History of Famous Women*, however, there is a conspicuous absence of texts celebrating *gelehrte Frauen*, coinciding with the explosion of works that define the female vocation such that learnedness contradicts the nature of femininity. Holst's catalogue effectively redeploys the suppressed genre to deconstruct the physiological determination of sex and re-establish the interconnection between the sexes in all matters of civic life. In contrast to her contemporary male writers, who define gender roles according to a clean break between public and private, Holst draws from history to show that 'both [sexes] have too powerful an influence on the other not to have this certain effect' (*BW* 41/33).

Holst then selects Pockels as an exemplar of this mistaken claim, punctuating a series of unsavoury passages from *Characteristics of the Female Sex* with sardonic commentary. Her selection unearths a slide from descriptive claims about the actual discrepancy between men's and women's education to normative claims about women's natural capacities. For instance, Pockels observes that 'by reading ancient poetry, by nurturing our capacity for thought, and by studying nature and art in depth, we [men] get to know nature in itself and in its sublimity earlier than women' (*BW* 73/46). Yet he then generalizes from this description to assert that, 'as a rule, every feeling is greater and more vivid in men than in women' (*BW* 73/46). It thus

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<sup>40</sup> Ebbersmeyer, 'From a "memorable place" to "drops in the ocean"', 445–448.

seems obvious to Pockels to view the conjunction of *learned* and *woman* as a violation of nature:

a so-called learned woman is and remains either a – laughable or an adverse creature. Either her learnedness is not right, or, even if it were, then she is – not right as a *woman*. If the latter, then as a woman she is a non-woman, something monstrous, and if this is how she is found in her natural state, she deserves merely to be *gaped at* and certainly never *admired*.<sup>41</sup>

Holst does not seek to refute Pockels' caricature of a learned woman. Instead, she presents a counter-sketch of a learned man, who is so absorbed in his profession that he neglects his family, his civic duties, and his own soul. What good will it do a dutiful wife, she demands, if 'her husband is praised in all the learned journals as a wonder of learnedness if he lacks genuine humanity, if he is always grumpy and glum in his home, if he forgets all the duties of a husband, father, and housefather?' (*BW* 138-139/73). Her point is that 'if we draw such spiteful conclusions from the learnedness of women, they must also follow for men' (*BW* 143/75).

Holst's parody draws attention to the male obsession with imaginary learned women rather than the many frivolous women who genuinely overlook their duties in sloth and vanity. Pockels' caricature betrays a particular male fear that learned women lack femininity. No one complains when a man is educated beyond his particular calling. Indeed, an excess in learnedness is praised among men. Yet as soon as a woman gains knowledge that extends beyond the requirements of her threefold duty, men feel compelled to write long tracts to implore to the public that learned women will be less pleasing, affectionate and yielding:

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<sup>41</sup> Pockels, *Versuch einer Charakteristik des weiblichen Geschlechts*, II 343-344. Cited by Holst at *BW* 131/70.

From this kind of language, one could easily conclude that these men were afraid that in the course of their higher development women may think of calling to account the many injustices they have had to endure. For a creature who knows its duties according to their source and in their entirety will of course also acquire knowledge of its rights along the way, for the two cannot be separated from each other. (*BW* 149-150/77-78)

Holst does not press a radical agenda of mutual acknowledgment. Her focus remains locked on the advancement of women's education. Any argument that restricts women's higher intellectual development must fail, she argues, for the level of education appropriate to her threefold calling is without limit. Here Holst turns the discourse of the philanthropinists on its head, advocating women's study of physiology, anthropology, natural history, geography, the arts, and philosophy for their own sakes. To provide instruction to their children that does not simply skim the surface but delves into matters of 'deep knowledge [*tiefe Kenntnisse*] (*BW* 76/48), women require far more than a surface understanding of these fields. This is especially true for philosophy, which ties the disciplines together:

But as far as practical philosophy is concerned, which reassures and strengthens one's convictions through the investigations of important truths about *how*, *where*, and *why*, I maintain that these investigations, as the highest duty of all thinking beings, cannot collide with their individual duties. Nature would have to contradict itself. (*BW* 96/55-56)

A collision of the highest duty of thinking beings with the individual duties of a particular sex would require nature to contradict itself, for *both* are given by nature. Of course, the objection

might arise that, if a woman ‘were to become a speculative philosopher,’ she might fail to ‘fulfil her duties as a wife, mother, and housewife’ (*BW* 94/55). Holst concedes that a calling to professional philosophy would likely interfere with a woman’s duties, yet only if she were to ‘rise so high as to create her own philosophical system’ (*BW* 95/55). As we see in a Leibniz or a Kant, the creation of a philosophical system takes the labor of a life. Yet even here Holst refuses to concede a limit on female learnedness. How much would society actually lose if a woman were to dedicate her life to philosophy? ‘No more than they lost through the celibacy of Kant or Leibniz, who enriched the world merely through the immortal works they birthed as children of their minds’ (*BW* 95/55). Even professional philosophy should not fall outside the remit of a woman’s possibilities, for if we accept the learned dedication of Leibniz and Kant as a legitimate expression of the human vocation, it follows that the particular calling of one’s sex can be suspended for alternative social ends.

Exceptional circumstances aside, Holst lays down three general principles for the higher intellectual development of women. The first is that ‘the development of women must be entirely free’ (*BW* 63/43). Here Holst builds on the theory of education she developed in *Observations*, in which that there can be no predetermined restriction on where a student’s natural capacities may lead them. This principle rejects the idea of reading books for girls. Even the ancient texts must be available to women, which requires extensive learning of languages. And philosophy, ‘the science that teaches us our true conditions in regards to the highest being, ourselves and the external world,’ must be the source from which all her knowledge springs (*BW* 64/43).

The second principle is that the higher intellectual development of women ‘must flow from the only true source: humankind’s duty to develop all its powers and to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole as an active member’ (*BW* 65/43). Holst is well aware that she will be criticized by the male writers for possessing an inordinate desire to transcend her station. Once

more she overturns this criticism by pointing to the present social conditions, which make it impossible for women to acquire a legitimate desire for higher learning. Inordinate desires arise when women are denied the true source of knowledge. If education does not spring ‘from the duty of humankind, nothing could encourage us to develop our intellect other than the wretched desire to shine, and what a miserable purpose that would be!’ (*BW* 67/44). Echoing von Wobeser’s lament in the preface to *Elisa*, Holst claims that it is that true ‘knowledge makes us humble and self-effacing; half-baked and superficial knowledge makes us vain and proud’ (*BW* 65/43).

The third principle places a constraint on women’s higher intellectual development: it ‘cannot be extended to all individuals of the female sex’ (*BW* 68/44). Holst concedes that the higher intellectual development of women ‘extends only to the upper and middle classes.’ Here we encounter a tension in the text, for Holst does not extend her appeal for mutual acknowledgement to class relations.<sup>42</sup> It would be ridiculous to require the higher intellectual development of the wife of a day laborer or tradesman, she notes, for the sphere of learned knowledge is beyond the practical remit of the lower classes, ‘who must satisfy themselves with subordinate purposes’ (*BW* 68/44). While she accepts that ‘the gifts of nature are and must be unequally distributed,’ Holst’s defence of woman’s access to higher development clearly undermines any notion that women from the lower classes are less able. ‘How many philosophical minds,’ she muses, ‘which lacked the opportunity for development but could have competed with a Kant or a Leibniz, slumber unnoticed and unused behind the plough!’ (*BW* 90-91/53). Her argument is rather that, given the hidden providence of nature, the working class ‘must satisfy themselves with subordinate purposes’ (*BW* 68/44).

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<sup>42</sup> One of Holst’s early reviewers noted this tension, and used it against her. He argues that if humanity is conflated with learnedness, such that the vocation of *all* human beings is to perfect their powers through higher intellectual development, then higher education must be offered to every German. Such would be absurd, argues the reviewer, for humanity is perfected through taking up *one* calling. *Hamburg und Altona: eine Zeitschrift zur Geschichte der Zeit, der Sitten und des Geschmacks* 3, no. 7-9 (Hamburg: Nestler, 1802), 357.

The tension between Holst's defence of woman's full participation in the human vocation and her desire to appear as a reformer rather than a revolutionary leaves the public status of women unresolved. She does not explicitly advocate a radical change in civic relations ('I do not want to be a preacher of revolution [*Revolutionspredigerin*],' *BW* 6/19). Yet she redefines the normative definition of a woman such that she might become equal partners in marriage, pursue a career as a professional teacher, and even, in exceptional cases, abandon her threefold calling for the life of a scholar. Consider Holst's determination of the sexes, which typifies this ambiguity: 'As human beings, both are in completely equal relationship to humanity, even if as a consequence of our civic relations, as citizens of the state [*Staatsbürger*], the same cannot be said of both sexes' (*BW* 143/75). Does Holst accept civic inequality and yet affirm equality *qua* human being? Or does she implicitly critique the inequality of men and women as *Staatsbürger*, revealing such inequality to be unjustified when placed before the judgment seat of reason? Given her constant allusions to the fact that higher education will inevitably lead women to become conscious of their subordinate social status, it would seem that Holst's position falls closer to the latter. Yet her refusal to attack the civic inequality of the sexes, and her appeal to the providential inequality of the classes, suggests that Holst was unaware or even uninterested in the full implications of her critique. The task she sets for herself is to transform the vocation of woman *within* the constraints of her particular threefold calling. When she boldly declares that the higher intellectual development of women 'will refine, establish a principle for, and extend women's sphere of activity' (*BW* 96/56), it is a *redefinition* rather than a *deconstruction* of women's duties that she has in mind.

### *5. Conclusion*

The *Bestimmung* debate was not simply a philosophical dispute concerning the rights afforded by reason. It was also a constitutive feature of nation building.<sup>43</sup> As the advent of citizen society in the eighteenth century unsettled the social fabric of the German states, the proliferation of texts on the vocation of women reflects a conservative reaction, materialized through the performative repetition of a conception of sexual difference based on physiology.<sup>44</sup> Holst unearths the fragility of this discourse by exposing the male preoccupation with female learnedness as a failure to acknowledge the same condition of thinking in another being, thereby inhibiting the progress of reason and placing the Enlightenment project in jeopardy.

The reception of *On the Vocation of Woman* provides a stark insight into the obstacles facing female philosophers in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century. An anonymous reviewer for the *Kaiserlich-Privilegierte* dismissed Holst's arguments and instead launched an attack on her character. He notes that while Holst *thinks* that her higher development places her among the great pedagogues of her time (Meiners, Pockels, Ewald, etc.), her 'scornful remarks' about the arguments of learned men reveals that 'it is impossible to consider that [the female sex] is destined to rise to the scientific culture of men.'<sup>45</sup> Even if one were to concede that women have the capacity for higher intellectual development, it is 'obvious that the author was prevented by her domestic duties from acquiring the necessary instruction on the subjects of which she speaks.' For good measure, the reviewer concludes with some unsolicited advice:

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<sup>43</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (Sage: London, 1997), Ch. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Heide von Felden, 'Geschlechterkonstruktion und Frauenbildung im 18. Jahrhundert: Jean Jacques Rousseau und die zeitgenössische Rezeption in Deutschland', in *Handbuch zur Frauenbildung*, ed. Wiltrud Geiseke (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2001), 25.

<sup>45</sup> *Kaiserlich-Privilegierte hamburgische neue Zeitung*, 34, no. 27 (Februar 1802): 12.

the author is to be advised that she continues the praiseworthy business of developing her mind in such a way that her actual female vocation does not suffer from it; but that she guards herself, through her desire to charm gallant men by showing off her immature intellect, from seeking flattery at the expense of pure truth.<sup>46</sup>

A lengthy review in *Hamburg und Altona* criticized Holst's connection between humanity and learnedness. Because she 'confuses the concepts of learnedness and humanity,' the reviewer opines, 'her entire project is, for the most part, cast in shadow.'<sup>47</sup> The reviewer retreats to the philanthropinist trope that 'a LEARNED woman, in the true sense of the word, is neither human, nor wise, nor charming.'<sup>48</sup> Learnedness is not essential to realizing the human vocation but is rather 'a trade [*Gewerbe*] which nature seems to have ordained [*bestimmt*] to man.'<sup>49</sup> In contrast,

Woman, with the duties that nature and FEMININTY have imposed upon her, is permitted no time for it. If the woman wants to be a scholar by profession, she must renounce the name of wife and mother, and even more of housewife. No one but Nature can do this for her.<sup>50</sup>

The reviewer concludes that because a woman's charm lies in her humanity, 'the author must concede to me that true learnedness, which is often diametrically opposed to charm and grace,

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<sup>46</sup> *Kaiserlich-Privilegierte*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Hamburg und Altona*, 208

<sup>48</sup> *Hamburg und Altona*, 206.

<sup>49</sup> *Hamburg und Altona*, 207

<sup>50</sup> *Hamburg und Altona*, 207

cannot be present in charming women, if she properly separates both concepts from one another.<sup>51</sup> The gendered constraint he places on learnedness returns Holst to the very bind she went to such lengths to undermine: she must accept either that she is not learned, and is playing at a game beyond her station, or that she no longer represents women, for she has departed from the calling given to her by nature. Clearly the reviewer feels no need to deal with Holst's argument that particular duties can be affirmed while transforming the normative definition of woman within them.

*On the Vocation of Women* raises an important insight for the re-examination of female voices in the historiography of German philosophy. Throughout the text Holst retrieves the significant influence that women have exerted in philosophy, statecraft, and the arts despite lacking the opportunities afforded to men. Yet she also argues that the silence of women illuminates the workings of power. The gaps in the history of philosophy bear witness to a profound loss incurred by the failure of those in power to acknowledge the possibility of the same constitution of thinking in subordinate members of society. Anticipating the failure of her reviewers to take her arguments seriously, Holst concludes by calling directly on her ‘female friends [*Freundinnen*]’ to ‘refute the writers who falsely suppose that the higher intellectual development of our minds and the fulfilment of our individual duties cannot exist together’ (*BW* 280/130). ‘Be restless in the training of your mind’, she exhorts, for such is ‘the best way to silence those prejudices.’

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<sup>51</sup> *Hamburg und Altona*, 359-360.

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