

Materialism and heteronormativity

The question of gender within 18th century materialism remains surprisingly understudied. To be clear, there are thousands of publications on materiality, on gender and new materialism, on the *querelle des femmes*, on the status of women in the process of scientific dissection (as in Algarotti's *Il newtonianisme per le dame*) and of course on formerly neglected women philosophers like Gabrielle Suchon, Emilie du Chatelet or of course, Anne Conway and Margaret Cavendish. And in the more literary studies orbit, there have started to be attempts on «queering the Enlightenment». But what about 18th-century materialism? We imagine this movement as a profoundly emancipatory project, freeing the body and desire from rigid social and moral norms, and insisting on our profoundly animal nature. And this is true, but it is curiously blind to the question of gender or, alternately, surprisingly masculinist in its vision of what this liberation should be. Further, the unavoidable dimension of physiology - the way in which 18th c. materialism. 'physiologizes' or seeks to explain human personhood and individuality in terms of physiology - turns out to be itself deeply gendered (witness the debates on hypochondria and hysteria). I will examine some key cases of this awkward 'gendering' in 18th-century materialism, notably in Diderot, and contrast them with a less 'heteronormative' materialist vision in Mandeville.