

Judith Drake (c. 1670–post 1723)

'This is our Case; for Men being sensible as well of the Abilities of Mind in our Sex, as of the strength of Body in their own, began to grow Jealous, that we, who in the Infancy of the World were their Equals and Partners in Dominion, might in process of Time, by Subtlety and Stratagem, become their Superiours; and therefore began in good time to make use of Force (the Origine of Power) to compel us to a Subjection, Nature never meant; and made use of Natures liberality to them to take the benefit of her kindness from us.'

Or, on a more light-hearted note:

'For a Man ought no more to value himself upon being Wiser than a Woman, if he owe his Advantage to a better Education, and greater means of Information, then he ought to boast of his Courage, for beating a Man, when his hands were bound.'

An Essay in defence of the female sex. In which are inserted the characters of a pedant, a squire, a beau, a virtuoso, a poetaster, a city-critick, &c. in a letter to a lady. Written by a Lady (London: Printed for A. Roper and E. Wilkinson at the Black Boy, and R. Clavel at the Peacock, in Fleetstreet, 1696) [1st ed].

by Janet Todd

For many years attributed to Mary Astell, *An Essay* is in fact written in a humorous tone rather unlike the sober style of Drake's more famous contemporary. Defending women against prevalent misogynist stereotypes of levity, vanity and inconstancy, Drake satirized the moral flaws of the Scholar, the Country Squire and the Coffee-House Politician.

An Essay classified learning not solely as the study of classical texts, inaccessible to the majority of seventeenth-century women. Instead it encouraged young girls to stick with literary fare traditionally associated with female readership: English romances, novels, plays, and poems. These would furnish them with wit, humanity, manners and

conversational skills, ‘the true reasons why a Girl of Fifteen is reckon’d as ripe as a Boy of One and Twenty’.

Developing her argument from rationalist Lockean philosophy, Drake denied the existence of innate ideas and the distinction of sexes in souls. Women’s intellectual oppression was rooted in custom and contingency—and was not justifiable by reason. Turning on their head both Hobbes’s and Locke’s state-of-nature ideas, Drake pointed out that, if the different physiologies of men and women were indeed accepted as the cause of the unequal distribution of rights in society, it should follow that the ‘weaker’ physical vessel would best be fitted to intellectual pursuits:

... the very Make and Temper of our Remedies shew that we were never design’d for Fatigue; and the Vivacity of our Wits, and the Readiness of our Invention ... demonstrate that we were chiefly intended for Thought and the Exercise of the mind. Whereas on the contrary it is apparent from the strength and size of their Limbs, ... that Men were purposely fram’d and contriv’d for Action, and Labour.

Little is known about Drake’s own life. Born the daughter of a Cambridge solicitor, she married James Drake, fellow of the Royal Society and of the College of Physicians, well-known Tory pamphleteer and playwright. He supported her in the publication and promotion of her feminist tract. It remains unclear whether Drake resumed writing after 1696. Following the death of her husband in 1707 she edited and published the anatomical study he had just completed.

Recently scholars have claimed that the *Anthropologia Nova* was co-authored by Judith Drake, drawing attention in particular to its progressive views on the reproductive process, which argued for women’s active role in both conception and heredity.

It seems certain that Drake had acquired some medical knowledge. She appears to have supported herself as an unlicensed practitioner. In 1723 she was summoned before the Royal College of Physicians to answer accusations of malpractice. Her defence before its president Hans Sloane reveals that she had lost none of the spirit characterizing her earlier work: responding to a claimant’s accusation that she had administered him poison, she retorted that ‘the only poison ... administered was to his Ears—in a demand for money’.