**Andrew Janiak**. *The Enlightenment's Most Dangerous Woman: Émilie du Châtelet and the Making of Modern Philosophy*. Oxford University Press 2024. 304 pp. $29.99 USD (Hardcover 9780197757987).

In the Preface to her *Institutions of Physics* (1740), Émilie du Châtelet was the first to label the developments in physics over the preceding century a 'revolution'. The same text offered a normative account of science and philosophy, one that was hostile to intellectual hero-worship, resolutely pluralistic, and holistic about relations between physics, metaphysics, and mathematics:

> I advise you never to carry respect for the greatest men to the point of idolatry, as most of their disciples do. Each philosopher has seen something, and none has seen everything [. . .] Physics is an immense building, beyond the powers of any one person. Some add a stone, others whole wings . . . still others survey the plan of the building—myself among them. […]
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> Many truths in physics, metaphysics, and geometry are obviously interconnected. (Preface, x-xii, translation by author).

Andrew Janiak's first aim in *The Enlightenment's Most Dangerous Woman* is to explore and defend this account. His second is to understand why du Châtelet has been so badly neglected. The *Institutions* was a great success. By the end of her life, she was famous throughout Europe. Her pluralism influenced D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse*, and her concept of the scientific revolution influenced Kant's call for a philosophical revolution in the first *Critique* (Janiak 2024, 15-16). So, Janiak asks, "why isn't she a household name like them? Why isn't her contribution part of every narrative of the Enlightenment?" (16).

Instead, modern accounts often reduce du Châtelet to a walk-on part as Voltaire's 'mistress'. The neglect was setting in even at the height of her fame. Contemporary historians of philosophy like Johann Jakob Brucker, who admired her work, left her out of their narratives of 'modern' philosophy. D'Alembert didn't mention her in the *Preliminary Discourse*. Kant insulted her in *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime.*

Much blame lies with a culture that disadvantaged women generally. However, in du Châtelet's case, Janiak sees a more targeted exclusion on the part of her fellow *philosophes*, because "her ideas threatened to upset a new conception of the modern philosopher proclaimed in her age" (23). In calling her "the Enlightenment's most dangerous woman", he doesn't principally mean that she was dangerous to the pre-Enlightenment status quo. He means that she was dangerous to the

Enlightenment itself. He introduces this claim in Chapter One but only fleshes it out much later.

Janiak is leery about Voltaire's prominence in discussions of du Châtelet, but in a novel way the philosopher remains central here, embodying the spirit of partisanship she condemned. His *Elements of the Philosophy of Newton* (1738) was a work of near-religious devotion, smoothing over differences within the Newtonian fold and ignoring legitimate concerns about the *Principia*. Janiak's second chapter reconstructs these disputes, and his third explores du Châtelet's approach to four questions touching them: Is gravity essential to matter? Do hypotheses have a role in science? Is space absolute (Newton) or relative (Leibniz)? And do philosophical conceptions of matter—theories about monads, say—apply to the natural world?

> What unites these disparate questions is a methodological commitment to harmony: Simply put, for du Châtelet, *science and philosophy ought to be in harmony*. [. . .] [T]he disciple seeks conflict, hoping to vanquish his leader's foes. […] We ought to think for ourselves precisely by reanalysing old debates to see if they can be construed in a way that avoids conflict between science and philosophy (102).

Chapter Four describes the high-water mark of du Châtelet's fame. She was still excluded from the Academy in Paris, but came out on top in a debate with its secretary, Dortous de Marain. Samuel Formey reproduced thousands of words from the *Institutions* in the articles he contributed to the *Encyclopédie*, ensuring that she was a bedrock presence in the Enlightenment's most important text. (He acknowledged her about half the time.)

Du Châtelet died in 1749, at the age of forty-two. As we saw, her exclusion started early: Brucker knew her work well but left her out of his influential *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742-4), and Formey didn't mention her in his *Abrégé de l'histoire de la philosophie* (1760). Janiak returns in Chapter Five to his explanation for this. Texts like Brucker's developed a conception of 'modern' philosophy still familiar today, centred on a canon of heroes like Descartes and Newton. Their ideal was the "courageous, autonomous" eclectic (175), reflecting "a philosophical notion of modern masculinity" (176). But if du Châtelet were granted the same autonomy, it "might fundamentally break the social order" (180). "Du Châtelet's philosophical orientation in the preface to her *Institutions* made her a great threat to her male interlocutors," Janiak writes:

> For if her readers took her advice to heart, it would not only challenge an emerging theme of the Enlightenment; it would mean that young women would embrace intellectual freedom. They would threaten to break free of the male dominance of intellectual life in this

era (191).

As a result, her contemporaries ignored du Châtelet's independence and insisted on subsuming her under existing schools. In the *Elements*, Voltaire had addressed her as a 'disciple de Neuton'. After her death, he instead called the *Institutions* "an explication of the philosophy of Leibniz" (quoted at 179). This inaugurated a pattern of casting her work as derivative. She became "a philosopher in the old sense," "subordinated to the doctrine of a 'master'" (180), rather than an independent, truly modern thinker.

At first sight, du Châtelet's defence of intellectual independence aligns with her contemporaries' eclecticism. So, what was the tension? Janiak's argument turns on the idea that D'Alembert and others were convinced such eclecticism applied essentially to men—and that, if this gender restriction were removed, the ideal would collapse. That is tricky to prove, lying partway between a high-level claim about social structure and a low-level one about individual motivations. While Janiak vividly demonstrates the neglect du Châtelet suffered, he offers less evidence for his more distinctive claim about her dangerousness.

In making that claim, he often deploys a very modern register of sentimentalised badassery—'danger', 'unruliness'—that sits uneasily with du Châtelet's conciliatory method. That method is, on his view, her primary contribution:

> In the *Institutions*, du Châtelet [. . .] tries to resolve conflicts between various methods and ideas in both science and philosophy. But perhaps her greatest originality lies in her effort to diagnose the intellectual situation [i.e. sectarianism] that causes thinkers to adopt extreme positions and to promote conflict in the first place (113).

On this reading, the *Institutions* has a structure like Descartes' *Discourse* and *Essays*: a prefatory text outlining a novel method, followed by a series of demonstration pieces. But du Châtelet's methodological remarks are a thin reed for the weight Janiak makes them bear. The Preface represents only fifteen of almost six hundred pages in the second edition. Her remarks on independence and partisanship—the substance of the 'diagnosis'—amount to a half-dozen paragraphs within it. Janiak emphasises the originality of this material, but some of it sounds ominously conventional. Even the most doctrinaire modern physicists had long filled their paratexts with declarations of independence and grumbling about *sectateurs*. A similar point can be made about her gradualism: for instance, in his *Traité de physique* (1671), the orthodox Cartesian Jacques Rohault described the sciences growing 'little by little', through the contributions of 'a vast

host of people'—except physics, which has been held back by 'blind submission' to authority.

The question is not about du Châtelet's value, but whether the topic of method is the best way to explore it. Indeed, an unintuitive consequence of Janiak's focus is that du Châtelet herself comes up less than you might expect. There's little mention of her writing beyond the *Institutions*; and because of the focus on the Preface, the body of the text only figures in a sustained way in Chapter Three. Janiak's expositions of ground-level debates in physics and philosophy, while superb, are dominated by Newton, Leibniz, and Euler, and for long stretches du Châtelet herself almost drops out of view. Chapter Two is ostensibly an application of her method to debates about Newton, but what results in practice is a discussion of *Principia* as long as that of the *Institutions* in the following chapter.

But these concerns largely reflect the ambition and distinctiveness of Janiak's book. He describes a novel linkage between du Châtelet's work and modern philosophy's self-conception, and in doing so traces surprising connections between the Enlightenment's conception of inquiry and the social structures it reproduced. Along the way, he provides a sophisticated introduction to intricate historical problems in physics and metaphysics. While elements of his projects raise doubts, there is none about his central claim: that du Châtelet's exclusion should come to an end.

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