



The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress (Palgrave Studies in Cultural and Intellectual History)

Silvia Sebastiani

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The Scottish Enlightenment shaped a new conception of history as a gradual and universal progress from savagery to civil society. Whereas women emancipated themselves from the yoke of male-masters, men in turn acquired polite manners and became civilized. Such a conception, however, presents problematic questions: why were the Americans still savage? Why was it that the Europeans only had completed all the stages of the historic process? Could modern societies escape the destiny of earlier empires and avoid decadence? Was there a limit beyond which women's influence might result in dehumanization? The Scottish Enlightenment's legacy for modernity emerges here as a two-faced Janus, an unresolved tension between universalism and hierarchy, progress and the limits of progress.

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