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Author
Curtis, Louise

Publication Date
2020-04-01

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Leserinnen and Enlightenment:
Johanna Unzer's Philosophy for Women

Louise Curtis

Although the eighteenth century saw the development of a rich print culture for and by women, their entry into philosophy was much slower and more difficult. Even as literacy rates rose and publication of philosophical texts in vernacular became more common, constraints on female education continued to limit women's ability to fully join the intellectual sphere both as contributors and as readers. Johanna Charlotte Unzer-Ziegler's *Grundriß einer Weltweisheit für das Frauenzimmer* (Foundations of a Philosophy for Women, 1751) may have been the first work of philosophy by a female author to have been written specifically for a female audience, at least in Germany.[1] Though not widely read at the time or today, the book nonetheless provides fascinating insights into the 18th century project of philosophy for women, and the more general relationship between women and philosophy in the Enlightenment period. Unzer sought to break down the cultural and institutional barriers that kept women from engaging with philosophy, and left a map for women to join the reading and thinking public in their own right.

I. Women and Learning in the Eighteenth Century

Several important transformations in the eighteenth century provide the backdrop for Unzer's writing. First, literacy rates in Europe were higher than ever before. There was certainly a discrepancy between men and women when it came to reading, and especially writing, ability, but status may have been a clearer determinant of literacy than gender.[2] The rise in literacy rates

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[1] Schneiders, "Zwischen Welt und Weisheit," 12.
[2] Melton, *Rise of the Public,* 86.

accompanied another shift in reading and writing. Most philosophical texts, even in the first half of the eighteenth century, were written in Latin, but slowly this began to change as more writers used their vernacular languages, expanding the potential audience for works of philosophy and literature significantly.[3] Thus, although women were barred from formal higher education, many—including Unzer herself—had access to informal education through reading or tutors.

Despite this, the prevailing attitude towards learned women remained generally negative. Women were not thought to possess the capacity to use reason. For example, the entry in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* for "reasonable" describes a reasonable man as someone whose actions conform with reason, but the author makes a clear distinction when the word is applied to a woman: a reasonable woman is one who does not allow herself to be seduced by charm—an obedient woman.[4] This is indicative of the attitude that women were not able, nor could they become able, to participate in the dynamic world of writing and philosophy which so often characterizes the eighteenth century. This attitude is seen again in the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant's famous essay, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" In his essay, Kant clearly states that women—the entire "fair sex"—cannot and do not think for themselves because they find it too difficult and dangerous.[5] In eighteenth century

[3] Melton, *Rise of the Public,* 88.
[4] "Raisonnable" in Diderot and d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie.*
[5] Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Practical Philosophy*, 17.

Europe, therefore, women were not only overlooked as writers and thinkers, but were not welcomed as contributors.

Yet the eighteenth century is often seen as a turning point for female philosophy, a time when women not only contributed more but were taken more seriously by their peers. Philosophers and writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Germaine de Staël, and Olympe de Gouge have been given considerable attention by historians for their development of women's philosophy and their role as precursors to contemporary feminism. Aside from writing philosophy, women also began to read philosophy in the eighteenth century. Historical writing on women as readers of philosophy is much harder to find. Very little scholarly literature exists on the odd phenomenon of writing "for women." Unzer's text therefore offers a unique opportunity to consider the way in which an eighteenth-century woman thought other women would be able to read, think, and understand. It also provides a rather different answer to the very pertinent question that gripped philosophers in the eighteenth century: how can man achieve enlightenment?

II. Biography

Johanna Charlotte Unzer (née Ziegler) was born in Halle an der Saale in 1724.[6] A center for Pietism and religious conservatism, Halle was also a university town. Unzer's father was a composer and organist, a student of Johann Sebastian Bach. Her family had close ties to the university,

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[6] Wilson, *Continental Women Writers,* 1270.

particularly to members of the medical faculty, but Unzer received only minimal early education, learning some French but no Latin or Greek. The most significant part of her education took place in her home, under the instruction of her father and several family friends. Her uncle, the physician and professor Johann Gottlob Krüger, and a family friend and professor of philosophy, Georg Friedrich Meier, were her two major intellectual influences and informal tutors. Later she began to study philosophy and science with Johann August Unzer, a medical student at the University of Halle, who also studied music with her father.[7] Around 1750, Johann August moved to Hamburg and then settled in Altona, where he worked as a physician and writer. In their time apart, Johann August continued to correspond with his former pupil about philosophy and they married in 1751. Unzer moved to Altona shortly thereafter. Altona was more liberal than Halle because of its proximity to Denmark, a country with (relative) religious freedom.[8]

Unzer achieved far more fame as a poet than as a philosopher. Her philosophy was mostly ignored by her male contemporaries, despite the support she received from her uncle and husband. She wrote poetry about love, marriage, and later motherhood—especially after the loss of two children in infancy. She also wrote about lighter topics, and her first publication was a collection of humorous poems.[9] Unzer was recognized for her poetry and was awarded the imperial *Dichterkrone* (Poet Laureate) from

[7] Gehring, *Ausschnit*, 16.
[8] Labouvie, *Frauen in Sachsen-Anhalt*, 366–367; Wilson, *Continental Women Writers*, 1270–1271.
[9] *Versuch in Scherzgedichten,* 1751.

the University of Helmstedt in 1753, shortly after publishing her first collection. Starting around 1510, women were occasionally awarded the title of Poet Laureate in the Holy Roman Empire, either from the emperor or from a university. The Poet Laureate was not a particularly important title, but poets who were awarded the *Dichterkrone* likely had more commercial success. By the mid-eighteenth century, it was relatively common for women to receive this award due to the more general transition from Latin to German poetry.[10] This shift broke down a significant barrier for women wishing to enter the literary world because far more women could read and write in their own vernacular language than in Latin. Laureation gave women opportunities for commercial success, but female authors were still not widely accepted in the male-dominated literary world.[11] At that time women were largely excluded from literary organizations as well. With the support of her uncle, however, Unzer became an honorary member of the literary societies of Göttingen and Helmstedt in 1753. Unzer thus attained recognition and some success by gaining tentative access to the male-dominated public intellectual sphere.

Unzer's main contribution to philosophy had a very specific audience: what she called *das Frauenzimmer*, loosely "the woman." The idea of philosophy for women surfaced multiple times in the seventeenth and

[10] Flood, "Poets Laureate of the Holy Roman Empire," 20.

[11] There are many examples of men critiquing female authorship in this period. Women were also generally not allowed to attend university ceremonies and were thus often not even present at their own laureation ceremonies. See Flood, *Poets Laureate in the Holy Roman Empire: A Bio-bibliographical Handbook*, ccviii–ccxiv.

eighteenth centuries.[12] To understand Unzer's book and the challenges she faced in writing it, it is first useful to consider the project from a different angle.

III. A Parallel Project: Christian Wolff's Attempt at Philosophy for Women

In 1738, the philosopher Christian Wolff corresponded with his patron, Ernst Christoph von Manteuffel, about the possibility of writing an introduction to philosophy specifically for women.[13] Wolff (1679–1754) was a philosopher associated with the early German Enlightenment, active in the first half of the eighteenth century. He is recognized for his emphasis on reason and rationality, as well as his ambition to create a unified foundation for all sciences. Though influential in his own time he is often overlooked by modern historians and philosophers, as many scholars contend that he was unoriginal and overshadowed by the more influential figures of the later German Enlightenment. Wolff is most often seen as a stepping stone between Gottfried Leibniz, active around the turn of the eighteenth century, and Immanuel Kant, active at the end of the eighteenth century. Christian Wolff's philosophy is set apart from his contemporaries by his insistence on utility and his desire to write popular philosophy, which often took the form of systematized writings, making other philosophers' writing more

[12] François Poulain de la Barre, Christian Thomasius, Molière, and Samuel Formey are a few examples of men who published work concerning women's philosophical education in the late 17th and 18th centuries.
[13] Manteuffel, a Prussian nobleman, was a patron of Christian Wolff. He funded many of Wolff's projects and therefore had some influence over which projects Wolff took on. See Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames."

comprehensible.[14] In this way he contributed to the spread of philosophy from a small group of privileged intellectuals to a larger group, making philosophy accessible to anyone who could read. Thus, Wolff's philosophical outlook lent itself well to the project of philosophy for women.

There exists an established link between women and the philosophy of Christian Wolff. Johann Heinrich Samuel Formey (1711–1797), a German clergyman and writer, wrote *La belle Wolfienne* in 1741, encouraging and allowing women to read Wolff's work in the form of a novel.[15] Wolff's emphasis on "popularizing" philosophy meant that his work was particularly suited to an adaptation for women because it was already intended for a broader audience than the intellectual elite. In a letter to Manteuffel in early 1738, Wolff suggested that he might be able to do women a service by writing a work of philosophy that prepared them and showed them how to use their own reason to interpret their thoughts in and of themselves—a philosophy directed at the usage of the "fair sex."[16] This forms the basis of his project; Manteuffel's enthusiastic reply encouraged Wolff to continue working on the project, loosely titled the *Philosophie des Dames* (Ladies' Philosophy).[17]

However, Manteuffel's excitement about the project had more to do with what he considered its universal utility than with the opportunity to

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[14] Frängsmyr, "Mathematical Method," 662.
[15] Green, *Women's Political Thought*, 122. As Green points out, the novel as a literary form was closely associated with women in this period.
[16] "Une philosophie pour l'usage du beau sexe," Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 47.
[17] Wolff wrote his letters in German, but Manteuffel wrote in French.

introduce women to philosophy. Because women had a strong influence on the men in their lives, a woman who could determine what was "good and true" would be able to influence others in her life to think that way as well.[18] According to Manteuffel, the ultimate goal of the *Philosophie des Dames* was to gradually educate the entire human race.[19] The project was much bigger than simply allowing women to philosophize themselves, but was intended to slowly and imperceptibly bring everyone towards enlightenment by instrumentalizing women's influence upon the men in their lives. Wolff tended to put more emphasis in his letters on his own ability to give women the tools necessary to engage with philosophy, at times framing his project as a gift he could offer women.[20] Manteuffel, in contrast, was considerably more interested in expanding the general, universal utility of the principles of reason and philosophy than he was in any undertaking specific to female readership. The Wolff/Manteuffel project was thus not intended to create a space for women to engage with philosophy, nor was it intended in any substantial way to bring women into the public intellectual sphere, but rather to rework Wolff's philosophy (specifically his moral philosophy) in a way that would be useful and educational for a wider audience, understood as an audience of men.

The letters between Wolff and Manteuffel bring some clarity to the notion of writing philosophy for women. Wolff and Manteuffel corresponded

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[18] Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 47–48.
[19] "Instruire insensiblement tout le genre humain." Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 48.
[20] Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 47.

specifically about the change in register and convention that they deemed necessary for this task, and how Wolff might write in a way that would be legible and interesting for his female readers. Manteuffel suggested Wolff structure it as a series of imagined letters between him and a woman who was interested in philosophy, but who did not know where to start with Wolff's massive and complex oeuvre.[21] The first letter would be a request from the woman to Wolff to summarize and simplify his philosophy so that she could read it, to which he would respond with descriptions and clarifications of his philosophy. The intention was that the female reader would not have to exert herself or suffer the boredom of reading *all* of his work, but that she would be introduced to what he considered his most important and most useful ideas. In the context of eighteenth century authorship, this is a recognizable format. Letters were a common literary tool because they impart a sense of familiarity and informality. Additionally, Wolff and Manteuffel concluded that two methods would be essential in making the content interesting for women: keeping it short and making it enjoyable.[22] Because the letters were never written, or at least never published, it is not entirely clear what Manteuffel meant by "enjoyable," but it likely would have meant humorous or poetic.

After 1739, it seems that Wolff abandoned this project. There is no further mention of the idea in his correspondence with Manteuffel, and he

[21] Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 47–48.
[22] "De les insinuer d'une manière un peu enjouée." Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 49.

never published a work of philosophy written specifically for women. Considering Manteuffel's excitement about the project, this seems surprising.[23] Wolff claimed he abandoned the philosophy for women because he was too busy, but Ecole suggests that it may have been because he was not actually equipped to write a sufficiently interesting and condensed set of letters that accomplished what he intended.[24] It would indeed have been an immense and ambitious challenge to distill so much into a short and beautifully written piece, and Wolff might not have been equipped to write it.

Perspective is an important consideration in this story. Unzer's perspective as a female writer meant that her vision and execution took a vastly different form from Wolff's. As a woman—and specifically as a woman who was not formally educated—Unzer was sensitive to the specific limitations and needs of women who were interested in philosophy yet did not have the same resources as men to study it. Wolff and Manteuffel wanted to use the epistolary form to engage women; Unzer specifically chose not to. Wolff and Manteuffel wanted to write a short and simple explanatory piece; Unzer wrote over 800 pages. These fundamental differences in their respective formats of philosophy for women exemplify the significant differences in the way that men and women understood the position of women in the eighteenth century intellectual world, and

[23] Wolff was working on several other projects at the time, including the *Philosophia practica universalis* (published 1744). Manteuffel encouraged Wolff to work on the *Philosophy des Dames* at first but later told him to finish his other projects first. See Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 54–55.
[24] Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 55.

underscore how radically unique Unzer's work was in its directness and sincerity.

IV. Introducing the *Grundriß*

Unzer published her only major philosophical work, the *Grundriß einer Weltweisheit für das Frauenzimmer* (*Grundriß*), in 1751. The series of letters sent between Johanna Charlotte and her husband while he lived in Altona, in which he translated and informally commented upon Alexander Baumgarten's *Metaphysics*, became the groundwork for this book.[25] Baumgarten, also a Halle pietist and philosopher of the first half of the 18th century, wrote mostly in Latin. Translation and explanation were therefore necessary steps for Unzer, as she could not read the original. While reading her husband's comprehensive and painstakingly detailed letters, Unzer became interested in the idea of making this knowledge, which she gained indirectly through the intervention of her husband, available to more women. Her uncle urged her to edit and rework the materials and ideas gleaned from these letters into a coherent book, and helped her publish it as the *Grundriß* in 1751. She revised and republished it in 1767. The second edition was published as two separate books, including the first edition concerning "*Weltweisheit,*" as well as a new book about natural philosophy, which built on the work of Carl Linnaeus.[26] The second edition also included a new foreword by Unzer, laying out her process and intentions. Both editions included a foreword by her uncle, Johann Gottlob Krüger. A respected

[25] Unzer, *Grundriß*, b4.
[26] Labouvie, *Frauen in Sachsen-Anhalt*, 367.

professor and doctor, his influence added credibility and may have brought more attention to her work.

The process of rewriting and reorganizing letters into a continuous text is noteworthy because it takes a far different form than the authorship of Unzer's male contemporaries. It is a reversal of Wolff and Manteuffel's proposed project. While Wolff and Manteuffel discussed fabricating a set of letters between a confused woman and a voice of authority, Unzer's process started with letters explaining a text, which she then consciously rewrote as a discursive philosophical text. This illustrates the alternative path women had to take towards writing and participating in philosophy, due to the restrictions of mostly informal and incomplete educations. Yet her end product, while simplified in its vocabulary and unique in its content, resembles a very typical philosophical text. This demonstrates her refusal to conform with the expected structures of "feminine" literature—in the eighteenth century, women were most notably successful as authors of novels.[27] Many female authors used this form and most writing intended for women took this form, and Unzer was actually one of the few women to write nonfiction in this period.[28] Her process also avoided the clear condescension of Wolff's approach, which was designed to reduce and simplify the philosophy so much that, in their view, "even" a woman could read it.

The *Grundriß* is carefully and consciously organized; it is structured in two parts, *Der ganzen Vernunftlehre und Hauptwissenschaft* (philosophy of

[27] Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment*, 41.
[28] Labouvie, *Frauen in Sachsen-Anhalt*, 366.

reason and metaphysics) and *Der ganzen Naturlehre* (natural philosophy, added in 1767). These two broad categories are then organized into sections such as *Weltwissenschaft* (World Knowledge) or *Natürliche Historie* (Natural History). Each of these sections is further divided into chapters, which are generally a few paragraphs concerning one or more terms such as "Begriffen" (Meanings), "Theile der Welt" (Parts of the World), and "Der Verstand" (The Mind).[29] In this way, her work reads almost like an encyclopedia. This systematic organization of terms is one of the ways in which the book was formatted for women specifically. Unzer chose to introduce readers to a range of ideas in a compact and clear arrangement, thereby solving one of the main problems faced by female readers interested in philosophy—the inaccessibility of extensive and dense bodies of work such as that of Christian Wolff.[30] In her foreword, Unzer addresses this point by stating her intention: that her readers should read many individual pieces of the book, once again ignoring the conventions of learned men.[31] Women could read what interested them specifically in short and entertaining sections. Thus, it is clear from the start that her intention was to write philosophy geared directly, even in its structure, towards women, who had a different orientation, different goals for their reading, different constraints, and different reading habits.

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[29] Unzer, *Grundriß*, b5 (Table of Contents).
[30] On this concern, see Manteuffel's letters in Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 49.
[31] "Die Absicht ist nur, dass sie von vielen Nachrichten lesen sollen." Unzer, *Grundriß*, b4.

The title Unzer chose was very purposeful and merits some closer consideration. First, she calls her project an attempt at "Weltweisheit" for women. The word *Weltweisheit* has a complicated history, originating as an insulting term used by clergymen for imperfect or worldly knowledge that did not come from God.[32] In the 18th century, following the "Verdeutschung" of philosophy and philosophical language from Latin to German, *Weltweisheit* was most commonly used simply to replace the word "philosophy". However, it still carried the original connotation of knowledge that came from reason or experience, not from God—setting it apart from *Gottesgelehrtheit* (theology).[33] Aside from the fact that the whole book was written in German, the choice of *Weltweisheit* instead of "Philosophie," which was also used in German, indicates that Unzer saw her project as very specifically intended for German women, who shared her own experience, not as a work with any universal goals.[34] In the 18th century, there were far more female philosophers in France and Italy than in Germany.[35] Her choice of the word *Weltweisheit* thus indicates that Unzer intended to lift German women to the level of Italian and French women.[36] It is also a key term for Wolff, who used

[32] Schneiders, "Zwischen Welt und Weisheit," 8–9.
[33] Schneiders, "Zwischen Welt und Weisheit," 9.
[34] This stands in contrast to Wolff and Manteuffel's idea of philosophy for women, as they clearly stated that they intended to translate the work as soon as possible, perhaps even during the writing process (Ecole, "Philosophie des Dames," 48).
[35] Schneiders, "Zwischen Welt und Weisheit," 11.
[36] This point is addressed in Krüger's dedication: "Ich habe diese kleine Gewaltthätigkeit vornehmlich in der Absicht unternommen, um der Welt zu zeigen, daß Deutschland eben so wie Italien und Frankreich Frauenzimmer aufweisen könne, die an den tiefsinnigsten Lehren der Weltweisheit einen Geschmack finden…" Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, a4.

the word in the sense of practical, rather than theoretical knowledge. It is possible, then, that Unzer also chose to use the word to emphasize the practical use of the work for women, instead of presenting her book as a work of philosophy in a complex and theoretical sense.

The word *Frauenzimmer* is also a crucial concept for the interpretation of the book. Derived from the Middle High German vrouwe (woman) and zimmer (room), it first meant the room of a high-class woman, but came to refer to the women who would serve a lady in her room, denoting simply a singular woman of good standing, either noble *or* common.[37] Other titles for philosophical works which were intended for women employed different language. Christian Wolff's proposed "Philosophie des Dames," (Ladies' Philosophy) or Francesco Algarotti's *Il newtonianismo per le dame* (*Newtonianism for ladies*), for example, similarly advertise themselves as being written for female readers, but "dame" and "dames" in standard usage indicate women of noble standing, ladies. The *Grundriß* thus seems to address women like Unzer herself—women who were not of noble birth and did not have the educational opportunities afforded by this status distinction, yet were or could be interested in reading and philosophy—a *potential* audience for further philosophy. In this way, the *Grundriß* aligns itself with the broader Enlightenment project of creating and expanding a world of readers which cut across status, class, *and* gender boundaries.

V. Entering the Text

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[37] "Eine feine, gebildete frauensperson" or "Eine gemeine, gewöhnliche frau." Deutsches Wörterbuch, Bd. 4, Sp. 84, 4.

The dedication and foreword, written by Krüger, describe the intention of the book and of the author. First, Krüger describes Unzer's entry into the world of philosophy: her book "contains the foundations of a country governed by reason."[38] He goes on to say,

> My sister's daughter fell so in love with the captivating landscape of a country which, despite being most pleasant, has very few residents. She mapped out the areas of that country, and drew from it a map in the way that she herself was able to imagine it, so that she could show the fair sex the way to the temple of truth.[39]

This metaphorical language indicates that Unzer discovered that she loved using reason and exploring philosophy only when it became accessible to her, when she was able to overcome societal barriers. For her own enjoyment, she decided to write about philosophy in a way that she found helpful for herself, and she later decided that she wanted to share this work with other women so that they too could discover the "temple of truth." She thus worked on providing a map with which women, who did not have the education, language ability, or means to engage as fully as men with the philosophy of her time, could navigate the complex and difficult intellectual landscape that characterized Enlightenment-era Europe. In Krüger's framing, women still did not have the capacity to "find the way to the temple of truth" on their own, but here their powerlessness is exogenous and not

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[38] "Enthält den Grundriß eines Landes, welches an der Vernunft beherrscht wird." Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, a4.

[39] "Meiner Schwesters Tochter hat sich in die reißenden Gegenden eines Landes, das bei der größten Annehmlichkeit so wenig Einwohner hat, dergestalt verliebt, dass sie dieselben entworfen, und mehr zu ihren eigenen Vergnügen eine Charte davon gezeichnet, als daß sie sich es hätte sollen in den Sinn kommen lassen, dem schönen Geschlechte dadurch den Weg zum Tempel der Wahrheit zu zeigen." Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, a4.

endogenous: with the right help, they would be able to find the way—and another woman had the capacity to be the guide. Unzer had unique access to philosophy through the letters of her husband, and she felt compelled to help other women gain access in a similar way.

Krüger's foreword brings up a central concern: the reception of the *Grundriß*, both among its intended female readers and among learned men. As Krüger made clear in his foreword, criticism of the book was to be expected. Interestingly, he believed that women would simply see the book as unnecessary for their purposes, because "they are already splendid and glorious enough to bewitch the hearts and eyes of men without needing the trifles of this book."[40] Men, on the other hand, would have a different problem with the text, according to Krüger:

> They will see this text as a declaration of war; from now on they will consider women to be their enemy; they will endeavor to curtail all their opportunities to perfect their minds; and it is to be expected that this will be done with the greatest fervor by those who themselves possess very little intellect...[41]

The strong, violent language he uses here—the book as a declaration of war, the entire fair sex as the enemy—suggests more than just passive and formal exclusion of women from the intellectual world of the 18th century.

[40] "Die ohne [die Kleinigkeiten] schon glänzend und prächtig genug sind um die Augen und Herzen der Manns-Personen zu bezaubern." Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, b.

[41] "Sie werden diese Schrift für eine Kriegserklärung ansehen; sie werden künftig das schöne Geschlecht als ihre Feinde betrachten; sie werden sich bemühen ihnen alle Gelegenheit zu beschneiden, ihren Verstand vollkommener zu machen; und es ist natürlich, dass solches von denen mit den größten Eifer geschehen wird, welche selbst sehr wenig Verstand besitzen...." Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, b.

Indeed, what Krüger presents here is a real fear of what women may be able to do if they were able to develop the use of their reason. This contradicts a popular claim at the time—seen even later in the writing of Kant, among other authors—that women inherently did not possess the ability to use reason or to, in Kant's words, achieve a state of *Mündigkeit* (maturity).[42] In fact, what is implied here is that Krüger sees the lack of comprehensive education for women and the inaccessibility of philosophical texts, a byproduct of educational constraints, as the only barriers stopping women from engaging with intellectual life in the 18th century. In this sense, the *Grundriß* can be seen as an attempt to break down that barrier by reformulating philosophical knowledge sensitive to the particular problems women faced when attempting to read philosophy.

Despite its unique presentation, the content of the *Grundriß* aligns with popular currents of philosophical thought. Unzer argued that knowledge could only come from a full understanding on a foundation of certainty, and her definition adheres to Wolffian tenets. For example, in the section titled "The general inner nature of all things,"[43] Unzer wrote that anything which could be imagined must, by definition, be something, for if it can be imagined it cannot be nothing. This proposition, according to Unzer, is called the "Satz des Widerspruchs," the very first foundation of all our perceptions.[44] The principle of non-contradiction, as it is called in English, is

[42] Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Practical Philosophy*, 17.
[43] "Die allgemeinen innern Bestimmungen aller Dinge"
[44] "Dieser Satz heißt der Satz des Widerspruchs…Es ist der allererste Grund aller unserer Erkenntnis." Unzer, *Grundriß*, 196 (§ 137).

the first principle of Wolff's entire philosophical system as well. The principle of non-contradiction, as Wolff saw it, essentially states that something cannot both be and not be at the same time. Wolff considered this principle to be the source of all certainty, along with the principle of sufficient reason.[45] Throughout the text Unzer followed Wolff's first principles, and therefore what may be called his mathematical method, to arrive at definitions for concepts.

At times Unzer also mirrored the structure of Wolff's work. Scholars of philosophy have often argued that Wolff did not contribute much to Enlightenment philosophy in terms of content, but most agree that his efforts at organizing branches of philosophy into a strict hierarchical system were significant to the development of a "rational" philosophy.[46] According to the chapter "On the parts of philosophy" in his *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General*, metaphysics consists of four parts: ontology, cosmology, psychology, and natural theology.[47] Unzer interpreted this structure and used it in her own presentation of metaphysics.[48] In her introduction to metaphysics, she states that metaphysics consists of four parts. She calls the first part "Grundwissenschaft," the study of the nature of all things, called ontology by Wolff; the second part "Weltwissenschaft," the study of the nature of the world, what Wolff called cosmology; the third "Seelenlehre," the study of the nature of human souls, Wolff's psychology;

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[45] Frängsmyr, "Wolff's Mathematical Method," 655.
[46] Frängesmyr, "Wolff's Mathematical Method," 650.
[47] Frängesmyr, "Wolff's Mathematical Method," 650–651.
[48] Gehring, *Ausschnitt,* 25.

and the fourth "natürliche Gottesgelehrheit," the study of the nature of God, in English natural theology.[49] Her terminology was different and her definitions are certainly simplistic, but her four parts of metaphysics line up with Wolff's divisions. Instead of directly citing contemporary philosophy, Unzer offered her readers an interpretation of what she considered important from her own reading and understanding of philosophical currents. Her thought process is clear in this case; using established philosophy as a basis, she reworded what she read (or had been taught) in language that was comprehensible, furnishing women with a vocabulary of philosophical concepts.

Like Wolff and Manteuffel, Unzer and Krüger thought carefully about how to frame this book in a way that would be enjoyable and most useful for women. Krüger wanted to avoid having the book "taste of school."[50] He avoided making the text itself dry by including additional explanatory footnotes which he considered "pedantic and dissolute," encouraging female readers not to read them.[51] He also used language which would have been intended to appeal to women, comparing himself to a gardener, and comparing the knowledge women would gain from the book to flowers grown in a garden.[52] The text itself is interspersed with humor, stories, and poetry written by Unzer, including a long story about a Native American man

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[49] Unzer, *Grundriß*, §133. Compare with Hettche and Dyck, "Christian Wolff," section 5.
[50]"Nach der Schule schmecken"; Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, b3.
[51]"schulfüchsig" and "lasterhaft." Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, b3.
[52] Krüger, "Vorrede," *Grundriß*, b3.

wandering through a forest of ghosts.[53] Thus, though the book essentially functioned as a form of education for women, it was understood that making it explicitly “educational” should be avoided. This was one of the conventions of writing intended for women. In this respect Unzer and Wolff’s projects had similar goals, yet a slightly different emphasis is present in the *Grundriß.* While Wolff and Manteuffel formulated their project as an active instructional material for women, seeing themselves as “teaching” women (albeit covertly), Unzer and Krüger formulated their intentions more passively. They presented it as though they were simply providing the materials to women—growing the flowers—to indicate a pathway beyond the barriers which had been set for them.

Krüger’s footnotes offer the opportunity to compare how Unzer wrote for women with how an established, learned scholar such as Krüger wrote for a more typical male audience. In his preface, Krüger specifically asked female readers not to read his footnotes, claiming he included them in order to remove the uninteresting aspects of the philosophy. Women who did not want too much of a challenge, then, could just read the text itself.[54] The footnotes themselves use a very different style of writing. For example, section 141 seeks to define possible things by one’s ability to imagine or conceive of that thing. Unzer provided her definition:

> Every possible thing is something that can be imagined. Were it nothing, it could not be imagined. Every possible thing is therefore

[53] Unzer, *Grundriß*, §139.
[54] Krüger, “Vorrede,” *Grundriß*, b2. Here it is implied that there might be other readers, perhaps men. This will be discussed more below.

> imaginable, because it is not nothing, but rather something. Something is that from which one can recognize that every possible thing is possible. Must not every possible thing therefore have its reason?[55]

Unzer used short sentences and familiar language to get her point across, allowing the female reader to follow her point without too much difficulty. The sentences above are her definition of the principle of sufficient reason. She then argued for the principle of sufficient reason by claiming that even small children adhere to it, because as soon as they can speak they begin to question what they see and ask why it is that way.[56] As mothers and housewives this reference to children would likely resonate with women as a form of domestic philosophy. Unzer's choice to present this philosophical concept within this framework exemplifies the way in which she attempted to make important ideas more applicable for women. The footnote for this section offers a very different perspective on this topic. Krüger writes that the reader (*Leser*) may decide for himself if the principle of sufficient reason was artfully threaded in to Unzer's argument or not.[57] This implies that Krüger did not see this as the best way to explicate the principle of sufficient reason. His footnote for this section is several pages

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[55] "Jedes mögliche ist Etwas, dies läßt sich vorstellen. Wäre es Nichts, so liesse es sich nicht vorstellen. Es ist also iedes Mögliche darum vorstellbar, weil es nicht Nichts, sondern Etwas ist. Etwas ist es also, woraus man erkennen kann, daß iedes mögliche Ding möglich sei. Muß also nicht iedes mögliche Ding seinen Grund haben." Unzer, *Grundriß*, § 141, 202.

[56] "Die kleine Kinder wissen dieselbe schon; denn so bald sie nur reden können, fragen sie bei allem, was sie sehen, warum es sei?" Unzer, *Grundriß*, § 141, 205.

[57] "Ob dieser Beweis von dem Satze des zureichenden Grundes listiger eingefädelt sei, oder mehr Überzeugung würken werde, als der gewöhnliche, wird das Urtheil der Leser entscheiden." Unzer, *Grundriß*, § 141, 202, n. 34.

long, written in complex and long sentences, and contains references to authoritative figures in philosophy such as Daniel Strähler (1690–1750), a Halle mathematician and philosopher.[58] Essentially, it is written in the exact style that made philosophy so inaccessible for women in the first place.

VI. Reconsidering Unzer's Project and Intentions

Unzer's text, then, lies at a crossroads. In many ways, it follows expected structures of philosophy, and in terms of content it does not offer anything radical. Yet in other ways it is completely unprecedented and unexpected. There is an important ambiguity as to the audience of the book. Because the audience is so specifically important in Unzer's book, it is worth reconsidering who is addressed and how the question of readership guided the writing process. Upon further reflection, the intended audience is not as clear as it seems to be.

On one hand, Unzer's book is advertised as a philosophy "*für das Frauenzimmer*"—for women. This curious word refers, again, to a singular woman, but in the 18th century it still carried the second (though less common) meaning of a space which was only open to women, in a literal sense a "room for women."[59] In that sense it could read as a sort of pun—the venue where women might philosophize. This could imply that Unzer in some ways intended to create a separate space for intellectual discourse, exclusive to women. In this reading, women would not be instruments for the spread of philosophy, as Wolff intended, but autonomous agents of a distinct

[58] Unzer, *Grundriß*, § 141, 203, n. 34.
[59] *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Bd. 4, Sp. 84, 1.

type of learning and thought. Throughout the text, Unzer refers to her "Leserinnen" (female readers), once again implying that the text is directed exclusively at women. However, there are a few elements of the text which point out that it was perhaps also intended to be read by a wider audience.

In Unzer's foreword, she once refers to her "Leserinnen und Leser" (female readers and male readers).[60] Thus, she also anticipated that male readers would be interested in reading the book. This points to a different set of intentions, which align more closely with her uncle's foreword. Unzer may have been writing for women in order to allow them to participate in philosophical discourse with men, offering an alternate path towards the goal of philosophical enlightenment which fit the specific needs of women, yet did not separate them from male readers.

Krüger's footnotes yet again complicate the question of audience. Krüger addresses the "Leser" (male reader) explicitly in his footnotes, without including the feminine "Leserinnen."[61] In the context of this book, this is an explicit declaration that women were not invited to read the footnotes as they were the text itself. Why, then, would Krüger add the footnotes? He does not give a satisfactory answer—as mentioned, he claimed that the reason was to avoid making the text itself dull. This seems to signal that Krüger felt he needed to add the notes to give the book legitimacy. It also signals that to Krüger, Unzer's voice was not sufficient for the explication of the philosophical concepts she addresses. At times the

[60] Unzer, *Grundriß*, b4.
[61] Unzer, *Grundriß*, § 141, 202, n. 34, *passim*.

footnotes take up more space on the page than Unzer's own writing. In a way, this reinforces the idea that women had to take a separate "path" towards what he called the "temple of truth," or an understanding and application of rational philosophy.[62] Yet, it also undermines the idea that this book could somehow allow women to engage on the same level as men in philosophy. The inclusion of the footnotes can be read as a rather explicit declaration that Unzer's writing does not constitute, for Krüger, a form of legitimate philosophy.

VII. Conclusions

This book offers a first step towards the removal of the barriers that kept women from philosophy in 18th century Germany, despite the tension that exists within it between the female author and the male voice of authority. Without a comprehensive secondary education or the possibility of a university education, women were formally excluded from participation in the intellectual activity of the Enlightenment—notwithstanding the few women who managed to make their marks. This book could not replace an education, and after finishing it the female readers would still not be on equal footing with men. Yet for many women it could offer a very basic understanding of philosophical principles of reason, and an introduction to important philosophy of the period that began to chip away at their institutional and cultural exclusion from the male-dominated intellectual public sphere.

[62] Krüger, "Vorrede," in Unzer, *Grundriß*, a4.

The content and form of the book also provide essential and rare insights into the state of female readership in the eighteenth century. Although we do not know how widely the book was read or how it was received, the style and methodology of Unzer's writing are an example of the ways in which the limitations and possibilities of female readership were perceived by someone who was not only a contemporary of these 18th century female readers, but a peer.

It is easy to overlook Unzer as simply a facilitator of philosophy, rather than a proper philosopher. In a general sense, it is true that the content of her work is not purely original and provides only an interpretation of existing philosophy; yet it is precisely in the act of interpretation that Unzer becomes such an important and interesting figure. Her work is an invaluable resource for its exposition of an eighteenth century thought process. Its unique form as rewritten letters—reconstructed explanation—is a stunning illustration of the distinctive ways in which women circumvented the limitations on learning they faced. She did not write, as she suggested in her title, a philosophy "for" women, but instead contributed a book of philosophy which staked a claim for a participatory role of women in the process of philosophy.

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