**Chapter 20: The Idea of a Female Ethic**

Jean Grimshaw

Grimshaw identifies an ambivalence about the idea of a "female" ethic going back to its origins in the eighteenth century, when thinkers like Rousseau claimed that certain characteristics could be faults in men and virtues in women, and Wollstonecraft countered by insisting on the universal, nongendered character of virtue. Grimshaw herself opposes essentialist notions of gender and expresses reservations about the view (advanced by Gilligan, Noddings, and others) that men and women typically reason differently about moral questions. The claim that women are more intuitive and less likely to appeal to principle has been used to justify women"s subordination too often to be accepted without serious reservations. A better strategy, Grimshaw suggests, might be to point out that men and women often have different ethical priorities, rooted in their different life experiences, so long as other differences, such as those that form along class and race lines, are not overlooked. However, there is no autonomous realm of feminine values or female experience; robust assertions of a distinctively female ethic should therefore be regarded with suspicion.