Towards the end of the seventeenth century, when political authority was being generally reenvisaged as an artificial construct, the specific power relation between women and men remained in the social imaginary as the product of nature. Men now stepped out of the pages of political philosophy as equal and free, so that – in theory – the only way in which one man could legitimately come to have power over other men would be if those men wanted it, if they agreed to it, through the social contract. The hierarchy between men and women, by contrast, was often represented – and legitimised – as the result of natural inequality between the sexes. The subordination of women had long been justified on the grounds of their essential inferiority. I do not know if it is customary to quote from the eponymous hero of this Society, but, as Aristotle declared in *The Politics*, ‘the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled’.1 QED.

This kind of inference reveals why nature has always been a central battleground for feminism: if one can prove that women are naturally equal to men, indeed if one can explode the very idea of nature – of anyone, men qua men, or women qua women, being essentially anything – then the de facto dominance of men is exposed as having no foundation in justice. If equality is conceded, but essential difference maintained (to explain why it is, for example, that women do the lioness’s share of the childcare) a feminist response might be that there are no relevant essential differences that adequately explain the organisation of the human world along gendered lines. Gender is a construct, as the mantra goes, and any appeal to nature must be ruled out of court.

This paper is going to consider some early modern women who ventured onto the battleground of nature. They were provoked by the charge that, as women, they were neither rational nor – relatedly – virtuous. They returned fire with two claims: first, that they did have the capacity for reason and virtue, and second, that if they were deficient in these qualities,

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this was a function not of nature, but of culture and power. They appear, then, albeit distantly, to be rehearsing arguments that we continue to make, and, certainly, I hope in this paper that the relevance of their words will come through. I propose, however, that their relevance will come through most urgently, if we situate them in their historical context. It is by trying to understand them in their terms, that we can hear them most distinctly. A number of commentators have proposed various contexts that bring the specific purposes of the authors I’m considering into relief. I hope to add to these a further context that will add a little more definition: the discipline of early modern logic.

Logic was part of the bedrock of an early modern education. It was taught at school as well as at university, and was disseminated not only in textbooks but in more discursive formats, such as Locke’s massively popular *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689). It therefore filtered through to a few women as well as many men. It had two related purposes: to think well and, by that means, to know as much it was possible to know about the world. As the art of reasoning it was also the art of virtue, insofar as if one considered things aright, one could see what was truly good and evil, and would act accordingly. But logic was also bound up with goodness in the sense that it promoted an ethics of understanding; it was conceived increasingly in this period as medicine for the mind that would cure it of its errors. It was as concerned with rooting out falsehood and sophistry, as it was in training the understanding towards truth. Logic therefore both framed the world and reformed the mind.

I am going to argue that women such as Mary Astell and Judith Drake are writing from within this tradition, or, to put the spatial metaphor more precisely, they are writing from outside this tradition, knocking on the door and asking to be let in. They were, I want to suggest, positioning themselves as logicians, demonstrating themselves as rational and thereby reframing the world. At the same time, they conceded, just like their male counterparts, that there were obstacles on their own path to reason and virtue. These obstacles resemble the familiar obstacles of established logic – such as the abuse of words, or the derailing effect of authority – but they derive their specific shape from the brutality of gender relations, and loom large in the minds of women. I have identified three kinds of impediment that women writers said stood in the way of their enlightenment: the first are words and ideas that do not signify truthfully the things they are supposed to represent. The second is the power relation between men and women that clouds, corrupts, and destabilises the mind. And the third is the emphasis on a woman’s externality, the way in which fixations with the reputation, beauty and openness of a woman stop her from being able to look inward and work upon her mind. Women articulated these
impediments both as a self-therapeutic means to dislodge them, and as a communicative act to prove that their minds were not defective by natural necessity, but rather by contingent circumstance.

This paper will begin by laying out the early modern view that women were by nature inferior to men, and specifically, that they lacked reason and virtue. It will then explore women’s responses: that they did possess these faculties, but that they were impeded from realising their full potential. I will conclude by asking how, and indeed whether, these women thought that these impediments to reason and virtue might be removed. Or to put it another way: was logic, that seventeenth century therapy for the mind, enough to save their lives?