

OXFORD READINGS



IN FEMINISM

FEMINISM & MASCULINITIES

Peter F. Murphy

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Feminism and Masculinities

Edited by

Peter F. Murphy

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

Introduction, Notes, and Selection © Peter F. Murphy

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ISBN 978-0-19-926724-8

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FEMINISM AND MASCULINITIES

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Dedicated to Charlie Haynie (1935–2001)

Freedom Rider, radical, mentor, friend, and a very early activist in the
American men's movement

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Acknowledgements

Once again, I want to begin by thanking my friend and wife, Sarah Gutwirth. Sarah's faith in the project and in me, coupled with her editing skills, improved this book immensely. My mother-in-law, Madelyn Gutwirth, provided invaluable historical references and critical insights.

Several people and groups at Murray State University contributed significant support. My Dean, Dr Sandra Jordan, allowed me the time away from my departmental chair's responsibilities to write when deadlines demanded it, and the 2003–2004 Presidential Fellowship from the Committee on International Studies and Research gave me both time and money to pursue the editing and writing full-time.

My research assistants worked long and hard to scan all of the articles into a computer, and to proofread the frequently inaccurate renditions. For their yeomen's work I wish to thank Kevin Link, who started the project, and Daniel B. Dietrich, B. J. Wilson, and Kristin Gillingham who stepped in toward the end to finish it. Their contributions were immeasurable.

All of the contributors to the collection deserve my thanks and two in particular warrant special acknowledgement: Michael Kimmel and Bob Lamm. Michael was more than generous with advice throughout the entire project, and Bob's immediate and warm friendship provided genuine enthusiasm for the project.

The series editors, Susan James and Teresa Brennan, deserve my deepest appreciation, and Ruth Anderson, my editor at Oxford University Press, merits my greatest thanks. Her advice, intelligence, and assistance only improved this collection of essays.

Within the extracts, editorial interpolations are given in italic type in square brackets. Where matter has been cut from the original to save space, this is indicated by an ellipsis in square brackets thus: [. . .].

Acknowledgements of essay sources include the following:

Adu-Poku, Samuel, 'Envisioning (Black) Male Feminism: A Cross-Cultural Perspective', *Journal of Gender Studies* 10(2) (July 2001), 157–67.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

Peter F. Murphy

Male authors of pro-woman and pro-feminist works span at least twenty-five hundred years and represent a vitally rich tradition. While much has been written about the overwhelming number of misogynist male authors, and complaints have been lodged against histories of feminism dominated by a few male writers, an intellectual history of male authors who have supported women's rights and causes is long overdue.¹

This Introduction cannot, of course, provide such a wide-ranging history. Rather, my task here is to locate the essays in this collection within the broader context of that prolific heritage, even if this Introduction must, perforce, provide only an abridged overview of this critical tradition.

Men supporting women's rights begins at least as early as late fifth- and early fourth-century Greece when Aristophanes pens his play *Lysistrata* (411 BCE), and Plato writes the *Republic* (380 BCE). In both of these works, women assume roles of equality with men, and see themselves included in important political decisions and strategies. *Lysistrata* introduces the notion of women holding political power, and suggests that they would wield it more wisely and more judiciously than men have ever done, and in Book V of Plato's *Republic*, guardian women acquire the same education as men and are given equal opportunities to participate in the activities of the state. By introducing the idea that even some women could be educated, Plato initiates the subsequent and sustained debates over women being allowed an education, an issue that dominated feminist debate in the seventeenth century.²

In the first century CE, Plutarch (46–120 CE) compiles his *Mulierum virtutes* (trans. *The Virtues [or Bravery] of Women*), which provides one of the earliest catalogues of women's achievements,³ a genre

adopted over the next several centuries by a variety of male authors as a means to praise famous women in history.

In the medieval period,⁴ a proto-feminist consciousness arises, one that may be characterized even as an emerging feminist awareness. Christine de Pizan's (1365–85) ground-breaking feminist treatise, *The City of Ladies* (1405), initiates what Joan Kelly refers to as 'the four-century long debate known as the *querelle des femmes*' (5), the 'Woman question'.

In the midst of this newly articulated political awareness on the part of women, two important male writers join the debate: Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75) and Geoffrey Chaucer (1343–1400), both of whom compiled catalogues of famous women as well. Boccaccio's unique (though not unproblematic) history of famous pagan women, *De claris mulieribus* (1355–9) (translated as *Concerning Famous Women* or just *Famous Women*), relies as much on a negative, insincere characterization of women as it does on what Virginia Brown describes as his 'praise of women's intellectual powers or their literary accomplishments or their moral virtues or their artistic creations' (xix).

Chaucer wrote his own version of the catalogue in *The Legend of Good Women* (1386), but his most famous contribution to a pro-woman position is, of course, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale'. Here Chaucer indicts the history of male misogynist writings by philosophers, theologians, and the medical profession while suggesting that women should have complete sovereignty over their lives (and their bodies).

The Renaissance witnesses the emergence of two significant philosophical traditions, both of which influence the deliberations about women's rights: Neoplatonism and humanism. The international spread of humanism across Europe in the fifteenth century saw the production of a truly international male response to the *querelle des femmes*, with the publication of works by men from Spain, France, and Italy. One of the first male authors from the Renaissance whose work can be described as pro-woman is the Spanish courtier Juan Rodriguez de la Camara. His treatise, *Triunfo de las donas* (trans. *The Triumph of Women*) appeared in 1438, and although a somewhat ambivalent work, according to Albert Rabil, Jr., Rodriguez 'argues not for the equality but for the superiority of women' (20). Within two years of Rodriguez's work, Martin Le Franc (1410–61) composed a long poem, *Le Champions des dames*, in which he defends 'women against their many detractors' and, not unlike Christine de Pisan, counters Jean de Meun's misogynist contributions to *The Romance of the Rose* (Rabil, Jr., 21).