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THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century



Marie le Jars de Gournay · Anna Maria van Schurman
Fra

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by
DESMOND M. CLARKE

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*For the next generation: Aida, Isabella,
Emily, and Eric Desmond*

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Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin organized a conference in Lyon on the work of Poulain de la Barre in October 2012, and also edited a selection of essays on women philosophers in the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* (July/September, 2013). I used my contributions to both initiatives to draft the commentaries on Poulain and van Schurman in the Introduction. Finally, Eileen O'Neill extended my interest in this literature when she invited participants to a conference on Seventeenth-Century Women Philosophers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1997, and assigned me responsibility for Anna Maria van Schurman. The librarians at Marsh's Library, Dublin (which includes Stillingfleet's book library), provided access to van Schurman's works and to many of the more recondite sources to which all three authors in this edition referred. The British Library compensated for inevitable limitations in the personal libraries of Marsh and Stillingfleet, and did so with a degree of friendly and efficient service unrivalled among other national libraries.

The challenge of identifying undocumented citations and references in these texts has been facilitated by the work of previous editors, from whose results I have borrowed and to which I have added some corrections or further relevant sources. Two anonymous readers on behalf of Oxford University Press also made helpful suggestions, though in the interests of brevity I have left some loose ends for future development by others.

Note on the Texts and Translations

A la Reyne, l'Égalité des hommes et des femmes was first published privately in 1622, while *Grief des dames* appeared initially as a chapter in *L'Ombre de la Damoiselle De Gournay* (Paris: Jean Libert, 1626). Gournay revised both texts a number of times in subsequent collections of her complete works. I have translated the final versions that appeared in *Les Advis, Ou, Les Presens de la Demoiselle de Gournay* (1641) and, for that purpose, have used the critical edition of the *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Claude Arnould et al. (Paris: Champion, 2002). Van Schurman's *Dissertatio* was written in Latin, and is translated from the first edition published as *Dissertatio de Ingenii muliebris ad Doctrinam, & meliores Litteras aptitudine* (Leiden: Elsevier, 1641). I have used italics to identify words or phrases that van Schurman used or quoted in ancient Greek, and have identified her infrequent use of other languages in notes. The selections from her correspondence are translated from *Opuscula Hebraea, Graeca, Gallica, Prosaica & Metrica* (Leiden: Elzevier, 1648), and those from her autobiography, which was also written in Latin, are translated from *Eukleria seu Melioris Partis Electio* (Altona: C. van der Meulen, 1673). Finally, the Poulain texts are translated from Poulain de la Barre, *De l'égalité des deux sexes. De l'éducation des dames. De l'excellence des hommes*, ed. Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin (Paris: Vrin, 2011). I have also consulted the first edition of *Discours physique et moral de l'égalité des deux sexes, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés* (Paris: Jean Du Puis, 1673), and have adopted that version of the title in the translation below.

There were no footnotes in Gournay's texts. Van Schurman's relatively few footnotes are identified in the text with superscript letters; however, her references are usually incomplete by today's standards, and I have expanded them when necessary and cited accessible modern editions of the sources to which she refers. Editorial notes and explanations are marked by Arabic numerals. I have adopted the same pattern to distinguish Poulain's infrequent footnotes from editorial notes.

The citation of book titles in English in the text of the Introduction may be misleading, and therefore requires a brief comment. Many of the books mentioned were published in Latin, French, Italian, or other languages, and it seemed useful for readers to have their titles translated into English.

Accordingly, I have adopted the practice of translating into English the titles of all works that are cited in the body of the Introduction. However, some of these books were also translated and published in English—some anonymously, some more than once—and I have attempted, by adding footnotes, to avoid confusion between citing published English translations and merely translating the titles of books that appeared in foreign languages.

Quotations from the Bible present special challenges, since no single English translation is likely to reflect the theological preferences of all three authors translated in this volume. I have used the Douay-Rheims version for quotations in Gournay's work (since she quotes the Latin Vulgate), and the King James version for biblical quotations that occur in van Schurman and Poulain, although evidently, none of the authors consulted or quoted an English Bible.

The translation of two synonymous words, in French and Latin, require a brief comment because, in one case, the original terms were ambiguous, and in the other we lack an equivalent simple term in contemporary English. The word *homo* in Latin and *l'homme* in French were often used by these authors to refer indiscriminately to human beings of both genders. The inclusive use of the term *homo* was already evident in the Latin edition of the Bible known as the Vulgate, which was used by Gournay when she quoted Genesis 1:27 ('God created man to his own image...male and female he created them'). Unless the context implied that an author meant males, I have generally translated *homines* and *hommes* in the plural as 'people' or 'human beings', and have adopted similar solutions for uses in the singular. In some contexts, however, these French and Latin terms are used to designate men only (though Latin also has the term *vir* to identify males). To avoid repeating this ambiguity in English, I have used the terms 'man' or 'men' in the translated texts only in cases where the corresponding French or Latin terms were applied exclusively to males.

The other words that gave some pause were *scientia* in Latin and *science* in French, though their original usage was not ambiguous. Both words were used in their scholastic sense by all three authors to refer to any systematic body of knowledge that was constructed according to the prevailing norms for the discipline in question. Accordingly, philosophy and theology both satisfied the relevant criteria and were called *scientiae* in Latin or *sciences* in French. In contrast, the word 'science' in English has been used since the nineteenth century to mean only certain kinds of empirical knowledge such as physics or chemistry, or, in a wider sense, mathematical or logical disciplines that are closely associated with empirical studies. Nonetheless,

despite the obvious difference in meaning and extension, I have reluctantly adopted the English term 'science' as a translation of *scientia* and *science*, especially when the latter terms are used in the plural, to avoid cumbersome phrases such as 'systematic bodies of knowledge'. This was also the solution adopted in English translations of Poulain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Readers might bear in mind, therefore, that a science in the early modern period was not the same as a science in the twenty-first century, and that the English word 'science' in these translations applies equally to physics, legal studies, or theology.

Finally, the word 'feminist' in the title of this volume is not self-explanatory. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is surprisingly brief and uninformative about how this term is used today to describe a very wide range of ideological or political perspectives. It offers a definition of the adjective 'feminist' as 'of or pertaining to feminism, or to women'; 'feminism' is defined as 'advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of the equality of the sexes)'. The texts translated here are feminist in the sense that they reject the misogynistic traditions that esteemed women (as such) less than men: they offer arguments to challenge the inferior status of women that prevailed in civil and ecclesiastical societies in the seventeenth century; they argue for women's right of equal access to educational opportunities; and, fundamentally, they claim that women in general are equal to men. In a word, these authors were feminists because they rejected what today is called 'gender' as a valid criterion for discriminating between human beings.

The following abbreviations and short titles are used for works cited frequently:

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|---------|--|
| ANF | <i>Anti-Nicene Fathers</i> , ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999. |
| AR | <i>The Complete Works of Aristotle</i> , ed. Jonathan Barnes. 2 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984. |
| AT | <i>Oeuvres de Descartes</i> , ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery. 8 vols. Rev. edn. Paris: Vrin, 1964–76. |
| CCSL | <i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i> . Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. |
| Decrees | Norman P. Tanner, ed., <i>Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils</i> . 2 vols. London: Sheed and Ward, 1990. |
| Essais | Michel de Montaigne, <i>Les essais: édition conforme au texte de l'exemplaire de Bordeaux</i> , ed. Pierre Villey; new edn. with a preface by V.-L. Saulnier. 3 vols. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1965. |

- Essays Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech. London: Penguin, 1991.
- GO Marie le Jars de Gournay, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Claude Arnould et al. 2 vols. Paris: Champion, 2002.
- LCL Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, followed by the volume number.
- NE Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- NPNF *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 2nd series. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.
- PG *Patrologia cursus completus ... Series Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris, 1857–64.
- PL *Patrologia cursus completus ... Series Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris, 1844–64.
- PO *De l'égalité des deux sexes. De l'éducation des dames. De l'excellence des hommes*, ed. Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin. Paris: Vrin, 2011.
- S Seneca: *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. John Davie, with an Introduction by T. Reinhardt. Oxford: Oxford University Press (World's Classics), 2007.
- ST Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth, and Elucidations of the Search after Truth*, trans. T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp. 2nd edn. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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Introduction

Alexis Troussel (alias Jacques Olivier) emerged briefly from obscurity in 1617, when he published a misogynistic tract entitled *Alphabet of the Imperfection and Malice of Women*. Troussel composed his diatribe as alphabetically ordered descriptions of female vices, beginning with the letter 'A' ('a very avaricious animal') and dedicated it to 'the worst creature in the world.' The following extract from the preface exemplifies the style and content of the whole book:

Woman! If your arrogant and fickle mind could know the fate of your misery and the vanity of your condition, you would flee from the light of day and seek out the shadows; you would hide in caverns and caves; you would curse your misfortune, regret your birth and hate yourself. Nonetheless, the extreme blindness that deprives you of this knowledge makes you live in society as the most imperfect creature in the universe, the scum of nature, the breeding ground of evils, the source of controversy, the laughing stock of the insane, the scourge of wisdom, the firebrand of hell, the instigator of vice, the cesspool of filth, a monster in nature, a necessary evil, a multiform chimera, a harmful pleasure, the bait of the devil, the enemy of the angels, the mask of God, deforming and undermining the wisdom of the very God who created you.¹

When an equally undistinguished M. Vigoureux argued that the faults attributed to women occurred just as frequently among men,² Troussel replied (within months of publishing the original *Alphabet*) by contrasting the alleged ignorance of his critic with the unimpeachable authorities on which he relied:

It is said, and it is true, that it is not the business of a blind man to judge colours. I say that it is not the business of an ignorant soldier like you to criticize and reproach those who prove their claims with good arguments and by reference to authorities drawn from holy Scripture and reliable authors, both philosophers and theologians.³

¹ *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes* (Paris: Jean Petit-Pas, 1617), 3–4.

² Le Sieur Vigoureux, *La Defense des femmes, contre l'alphabet de leur pretendue malice & imperfection* (Paris: Pierre Chevalier, 1617).

³ *Response aux impertinences de l'aposté capitaine Vigoureux: sur la defence des femmes* (Paris: Jean Petit-Pas, 1617), 29. Troussel had similarly claimed, in the *Alphabet*, that he relied on 'the reading of the Holy Scriptures and the most serious and profound authors of past and present centuries' (p. 332).

The French edition of Troussel's virulent alphabet was reprinted frequently throughout the seventeenth century and was 'newly translated out of the French into English' as *A Discourse of Women, Shewing their Imperfections Alphabetically*.⁴ Its subsequent republication in English testifies to the enduring popularity of misogyny among readers in both languages.

This brief interlude in the *querelle des femmes*, though it may appear atypical, illustrates many features of the ongoing controversy about the status of women and their alleged natural incapacities. In particular, it identifies the two authorities—namely, the Bible and the writings of ancient 'reliable authors'—to which most participants appealed to support disparate conclusions, and it highlights the challenges faced by those who wished to escape from traditional rhetoric and add a new dimension to the debate.

The dispute about women's natural talents and roles in society had oscillated in the sixteenth century between two diametrically opposite views—those that claimed that women were inferior to men, and those that argued that they were superior. Erasmus (1467–1536) reported a standard version of the inferiority thesis in 1514, allegedly on the authority of Plato, in his widely read and quoted *Praise of Folly*:

When Plato shows himself in doubt whether to place woman in the class of rational creatures or in that of brutes, he only wishes to point out how flagrant is the folly of the sex. For if by chance some woman wishes to be thought of as wise, she does nothing but show herself twice a fool. It is as if one took a bull to the masseuse, a thing quite 'against the grain', as the phrase is. It is doubly a fault, you know, when against nature one assumes the color of a virtue, warping one's character in a direction not its own. Just as according to the proverb of the Greeks, 'an ape is always an ape, though dressed in scarlet', so a woman is always a woman—that is, a fool—whatever part she may have chosen to play.⁵

Although the original text of the *Timaeus* does not support this interpretation, Erasmus' comment became a commonplace Platonic source to 'prove' that women are less rational than men. The opposite thesis—that women are superior to men—was defended by Erasmus' contemporary, Cornelius

⁴ There were later French editions in 1619, 1626, 1628, 1634, 1640, 1646, 1658, and 1683. The English edition omitted the author's name and the prefatory material quoted in the text above. It was presented as 'The Anatomy of Women; Described in Two and Twenty several Vices Alphabetically' (although there were twenty-three chapters), and was published in London by Henry Brome in 1662 (reprinted, 1673).

⁵ Erasmus, *Opera Omnia* (Leiden, 1706), IV, 418; *The Praise of Folly*, trans. H. H. Hudson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941/1970), 23–4. Erasmus relies on *Timaeus* 91A–D.

Agrippa (1486–1535), in the *Declamation on the Nobility and Pre-eminence of the Female Sex* (1529). Agrippa conceded that, while ‘one sex is not pre-eminent over the other because of the nature of the soul...in everything else apart from the divine essence of the soul, women...are almost infinitely superior to the uncouth male gender.’⁶

Similar contradictory claims about women continued to appear in the seventeenth century. Rolet’s *Historical Account of the Wiles and Craftiness of Women* (1623) suggested that women were the exclusive source of all the evils in the world. According to Rolet, ‘there is no animal in the world more dangerous than woman’ and, since their malice is almost infinite, he would have exhausted his supply of paper had he attempted to provide a comprehensive account of female malice from the beginning of time.⁷ In contrast, Jacquette Guillaume’s book announces its thesis in the title: *Illustrious Women: or it is proved by sound and convincing reasons that the female sex surpasses the male sex in all kinds of ways*.⁸ Gabriel Gilbert and François Du Soucy likewise argued for the superiority of women.⁹ In addition to these tracts about the inferiority or superiority of women, there was also a distinct genre that avoided direct comparison of the sexes by simply reporting famous women who became eminent because of their virtues and achievements. Boccaccio had provided an exemplar of this in *Concerning Famous Women*, which was mined by many subsequent writers for historical examples of illustrious women.¹⁰ Those who adopted Boccaccio’s approach in the seventeenth century included Louis Machon, *Discourse or Apologetic Lecture in Support of Women* (1641), Madeleine de Scudéry, *Illustrious Women* (1642), and Pierre Le Moyne, *The Gallery of Great Women* (1647).¹¹

⁶ *De Nobilitate & Praecellentia Foeminei sexus* (1529), 4A.

⁷ L.S.R., *Tableau historique des ruses et subtilitez des femmes* (Paris: Rolet Boutonne, 1623), 3–4, 86.

⁸ *Les dames illustres ou par bonnes et fortes raisons, il se prouve, que le Sexe féminin surpasse en toutes sortes de genres le Sexe masculin* (Paris: Thomas Jolly, 1665).

⁹ Gilbert, *Panegyrique des Dames* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1650): ‘I planned to show that women are more perfect than men’ (p. 4); Du Soucy, *Le Triomphe des Dames* (Paris: chez l’auteur, 1646), 199–201, 214.

¹⁰ *De mulieribus claris*, which was written in Italian in 1361/62, and first published in Latin in 1463.

¹¹ Machon, *Discours ou Sermon apologetique, en faveur des femmes. Question nouvelle, curieuse, & non jamais soustenue* (Paris: T. Blaise, 1641); George de Scudéry, *Les femmes illustres, ou les harangues heroiques de Monsieur de Scudéry, avec les veritables portraits de ces Heroines, tirez des Medailles Antiques* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville & A. Courbé, 1642) which was published by Madeleine de Scudéry under her brother’s name; Le Moyne, *La Gallerie des femmes fortes* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville, 1647).

In this turmoil of conflicting ideas and polarized claims, the three authors translated in this edition made a novel contribution by arguing for the *equality* of men and women. Despite significant differences in their educational experiences and religious affiliations, they also shared a measure of intellectual independence that made it possible for them to defend feminist egalitarianism against prevailing orthodoxies in the civil and ecclesiastical consensus of the early modern period. Their biographies testify to their relative autonomy, natural resilience, and the extent to which they challenged received wisdom.

Marie le Jars de Gournay (1568–1645), the eldest of six children, was born in Paris but spent a significant period of her youth at the family estate at Gournay-sur-Aronde, in Picardie, after her father's death in 1577.¹² She had no formal education, though she taught herself Latin and some Greek before the intellectual awakening that she experienced on reading Montaigne's *Essays* in 1584. When Montaigne came to Paris four years later, Gournay asked to meet him and, following their conversations, she described herself as his *fille d'alliance* or adoptive daughter. Montaigne subsequently visited Gournay for a few months at Gournay-sur-Aronde; despite the significant age gap between them, these brief encounters resulted in correspondence between Montaigne and his enthusiastic disciple until Montaigne's death (in 1592) at his chateau in the south of France. The death of Gournay's mother the previous year left her doubly bereaved; she effectively assumed full responsibility for care of the family and for stabilizing its parlous financial situation. When the family estate in Picardie was inherited by her younger brother, Marie le Jars returned to Paris, where she spent the rest of her life.

Gournay was then twenty-four years old. The relatively limited range of lifestyle options available to young women in France at that time included marriage, life in a convent, or employment as a servant. Marie le Jars declined to marry, despite her mother's insistent encouragement, and she rejected the convent life that her younger sister Léonore followed. Nor was Gournay a noble lady with financial resources to provide the free time required to engage in serious studies. Instead she set about constructing a novel and distinctive social status for herself as a professional writer of very

¹² For this biographical sketch I have borrowed from Gournay's *Apologie pour celle qui écrit* (1634) and from Marjorie J. Illsley, *A Daughter of the Renaissance: Marie le Jars de Gournay. Her Life and Works* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963).

modest means. This choice was anomalous; in fact, Gournay was at odds with the spirit of the times in many features of her life. She assumed the role of editor of posthumous editions of Montaigne's *Essays* despite her lack of a formal education, and thereby incurred the scorn of some contemporary scholars.¹³ She was at odds with public opinion when, in an open letter to the Queen that she subsequently came to regret, she defended the Jesuits following the regicide of Henry IV.¹⁴ Gournay was also a Catholic moralist in an age when the market was already replete with pamphlets by Huguenots, Jesuits, Oratorians, Jansenists, sceptics, and others who provided readers with a surfeit of advice about how to live their lives. She published poems that were generally not highly rated by readers or critics, and expressed tolerant views about alternative Christian churches when religious toleration was hardly popular in France. This profile of an independent unmarried woman as a professional writer, living in very modest means in an attic apartment in central Paris, accompanied only by her maid, was further complicated by her public expressions of feminism.

Gournay's first publication—a short novel entitled *The Promenade of Monsieur de Montaigne* (1594)—revealed her feminist sympathies in frequent rhetorical digressions, such as: 'It is commonly believed that, in order to be chaste, a woman should not be educated; truly, one fails to honour chastity if one believes that it can be found attractive only by those who are blind.'¹⁵ Some of these narratively misplaced defences of women's virtue and natural ability were deleted from later editions of the *Promenade* and were integrated into *The Equality of Men and Women*, which was published in 1622. Likewise, her Preface for Montaigne's *Essays* in 1595 included the ironic sentiments about the 'blessed' condition of women that reappeared, in 1626, in the opening sentences of *The Ladies' Complaint*.¹⁶ This brief tract revealed more clearly than *Equality* how strongly Gournay felt about the inferior condition of women. When it first appeared, its author was

¹³ There were notable exceptions, such as the Dutch humanist, Justus Lipsius (1547–1606).

¹⁴ *Adieu, de l'ame du roy de France et de Navarre Henry le Grand à la Roynie. Avec, La defence des Peres Jesuites* (1610), GO I, 191–235.

¹⁵ GO, II, 1355, note 9 (1594 edn.).

¹⁶ 'Blessed are you, reader, if you are not a member of the sex that has been excluded from all goods, forbidden to be free, and also forbidden from all the virtues because it has been excluded from the power and moderation by the use of which the virtues are acquired.' GO, I, 283–4, note A. This was deleted from later editions of the Preface but then re-used in *The Ladies' Complaint*. The original titles of these texts were *l'Égalité des hommes et des femmes* (Paris: 1622) and *Grief des dames* (Paris: 1626).

already fifty-eight years old. Gournay, however, survived into her eightieth year, and during the following two decades she continued to edit Montaigne, to contribute to the literary, religious, and political discussions of polite society in Paris, and to publish revised editions of her own work. When she died in Paris on 13 July 1645, her life's work seemed to have died with her. None of her writings was republished until the twentieth century, and most critical commentary about her during the intervening centuries was negative.¹⁷ In this respect at least, she had much in common with one of her correspondents, Anna Maria van Schurman.

Van Schurman (1607–1678) was born, four decades after Gournay, into a strict Calvinist family in Germany, to where her grandparents had moved from Antwerp during the Spanish occupation.¹⁸ In 1615 she returned to The Netherlands and settled in Utrecht, where she spent most of her adult life and where she was educated at home until her father's death in 1623. Her decision to remain unmarried, like that of Gournay, seems to have been motivated partly by her religious beliefs, and partly by the obligation of taking care of her widowed mother and maiden aunts. In contrast with Gournay, however, van Schurman became an internationally renowned scholar. She displayed an amazing ability to learn languages from a very young age, and she mastered (among other languages) ancient Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. When the University of Utrecht was founded in 1636, Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) was appointed the first professor of theology, and he allowed van Schurman to hear his lectures unofficially if she sat behind a curtain to conceal her attendance.

It was during this period that she composed her *Dissertation* in Latin, as a young scholarly lady who was unequivocally committed to the strict Calvinism that Voetius defended against the liberal wing of the Reformed Church in the United Provinces. The *Dissertation* was published in a French translation in 1646, with the amended title: *A Famous Question: Is it necessary, or not, that girls be learned? Debated on each side by Miss Ann Marie van Schurman, a Dutch woman, and M. Andrew Rivet from Poitou*. It was also translated into English in 1659 as *The Learned Maid; or, Whether a Maid may be a*

¹⁷ The first republication of Gournay's writings, after 1641, was Mario Schiff, *La fille d'alliance de Montaigne, Marie de Gournay* (Paris: Champion, 1910).

¹⁸ See van Schurman's autobiography, *Eukleria seu melioris partis electio. Tractatus brevem vitae eius delineationem exhibens* (Altona: C. van der Meulen, 1673), and M. de Baar et al. eds., *Choosing the Better Part: Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–1678)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996).