EDITED BY

ANDREA RADASANU

THE PIOUS SEX

ESSAYS ON WOMEN AND RELIGION
IN THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

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For my parents, Claudia and Eugene Radasanu

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Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Pious Sex?

Andrea Radasanu

A collection of chapters such as this one, entitled *The Pious Sex* and purporting to enlighten the reader with respect to the relationship between women and religion, requires something of an apology.[1] Let me begin by attempting to articulate some of the reasons such a project may seem out of place and even objectionable in the current intellectual climate.

The notion that there is a special relationship between women and piety may call to mind the worst of the prejudices associated with women over the ages: the characterization of women as superstitious and inherently irrational creatures that must be kept firmly in hand by the patriarchal establishment. The suggestion that there is a special relationship between women and piety, in short, conjures up the most oppressive picture of womanly virtue. From the faithful Penelope to Lucretia, whose female honor meant more to her than her life, to the Virgin Mary and more, the Western tradition seems to be a landscape of women who support a given political and religious order. It is also filled with visions of women transgressing these political and religious boundaries. But these transgressive models don't break the bonds of oppression, according to this view; rather, they reinforce them by representing the nightmare mirror image of the faithful women just mentioned. This second group includes such figures as Eve, Clytemnestra and Emma Bovary. Whatever the articulation of this special relationship between woman and piety, the implication seems to be that if such a connection really exists, then

woman isn't autonomous and is rightly perceived as an appendage of the patriarchy, which she serves faithfully or faithlessly.

Simone de Beauvoir provides a particularly nuanced version of the feminist complaint just outlined. She acknowledges a close link between women and piety, but understands this link to be a pathology born of the historical female condition, which precluded the possibility of true self-actualization. Women turn to religion as a result of the psycho-physical effects of menopause[2] or because of frustrated love (she claims that love has been assigned to women as their "supreme vocation"), or, more generally, because "Woman is habituated to living on her knees" and "ordinarily she expects her salvation to come down from the heaven where the males sit enthroned."[3] Beauvoir readily agrees that religious fanaticism of the kind associated with Joan of Arc and St. Theresa is more female than male, but she identifies this phenomenon as a symptom of female subjugation rather than part of the essence of womanhood. This point of view is not fundamentally different than the one outlined above, but it is superior to it in that it doesn't deny the observation that women—for better or worse—have been more closely tied to fervent piety than men. The question becomes why. The title of this volume *The Pious Sex* is therefore a purposeful allusion to Beauvoir's great work, meaning to evoke Beauvoir's intellectual rigor and her attempt to understand the nature of the female condition. This statement isn't meant to abstract from the differences between her work and this one: she begins with the assumption that history has been simply oppressive, and consequently concludes that an active agenda of emancipation is needed to throw off this oppression.[4] This volume rejects the premise (at least as a starting point) that all of Western civilization and the philosophic and poetic traditions that maintain it are simply sexist and oppressive.

There may be another reason for skepticism with respect to the topic of this volume. Rather than viewing the presumed link between women and piety as offensive, some might simply conclude that it is oddly or, more generously, quaintly antiquarian. Does anyone still think of women as innately religious? Is it a common assumption any longer that women fail to lead a life in accordance with reason as a result of their stubborn piety? Our society is so secular that even the secularism of women may be taken for granted.[5] This is a point that Amy Bonnette makes in her fine chapter on Jane Austen in this collection. For various reasons, egalitarianism and secularism have been powerful dual forces in the West that have helped shape our understanding of the most important things, not

least of which is the proper understanding of the defining characteristics, if there are any, of the sexes. Bonnette goes on to caution us against taking for granted the related assumptions of the equality of women and secularism. Western ideals of equality between the sexes, and our notions of the proper education of women have been challenged by non-Western forces. At the very least, we should be prepared to defend our values; and launching a reasoned defense is difficult when we assume the correctness of our own point of view. In order to consider in earnest the relationship between women and religion, one ought to look at those thinkers who not only make interesting observations about women but who also take the possibility of religion and revelation seriously.

The table of contents of this volume reveals that it is a collection of chapters on key philosophers and poets in the history of political thought. Most of these philosophers and poets are men, and few if any of them are motivated by a commitment to promoting equality between the sexes. What, then, is there to learn from these thinkers, and the chapters expounding different aspects of their treatment of the twin topics of women and religion? While some[6] have concluded that Western philosophy has failed to include women except as an afterthought, Arlene Saxonhouse argues that the history of political thought isn't simply a steady stream of malign indifference towards women or purposeful sexism. Rather, she emphasizes the degree to which pre-liberal political philosophy has important things to say about women. She makes the following claim: "The men of the city often overestimate the city's potential for abstractions and universality; the female reminds the early thinkers of the limits of that potential by clarifying the city's dependence on particular bodies, especially the reproductive bodies of its women."[7] Liberalism made the fatal mistake, according to Saxonhouse, of abstracting the private from the public and inspiring the subsequent feminist mantra, "The personal is political." While the private realm used to be the realm of women, now, with liberalism ascendant, neither the private nor the public belongs to women. "Whereas once women presented the political thinker with the task of understanding community by incorporating differences and recognizing a world apart from the political, within liberalism that role for the female disappears."[8] It isn't the case that Saxonhouse praises all things pre-liberal or that she isn't critical of certain misogynistic positions these thinkers take, but she does argue that ancient and early modern accounts of women can be valuable.

This volume follows in the footsteps of Saxonhouse. The best political philosophers and poets in the Western canon aren't driven by the prejudices of a given time and place—at least not simply. The Greeks, particularly Plato, were able to envision women who were not cloistered despite the claustrophobic life of most Greek women. Plato entertains the notion that girls and boys ought to receive the same education. If he and others conclude that there can't be perfect equality between men and women in the final analysis, it seems important to note the reasons for this conclusion and to defeat the arguments, if they can be defeated, based on serious engagement with them.

Two major themes emerge in this volume. First, the one already introduced, is the relationship between women and piety, and the proper role of women in private and public life. Second, this volume provides a view of the history of Western political thought as seen through the lens of women and religion. Since non-liberal philosophers offer a comprehensive view of politics including both private and public life (as Saxonhouse claims), the study of women and religion is not a marginal consideration but a central one and therefore very useful for understanding the philosopher or poet in question. Our lone liberal in this study Montesquieu cannot be accused of ignoring women; as Diana Schaub writes in her chapter, he's a ladies' man.

In the case of some, notably Rousseau, women are at the center of important aspects of the thinker's thought. Eve Grace argues that Rousseau's attempt to inspire women to be virtuous wives and mothers is a key component of his effort to solve the perhaps unsolvable problem (in Rousseau's view) of reconciling duty and self-love. In other cases, women as such are not the focus of a thinker's work, but the thinker's treatment of women or the application of general principles to women is revealing nonetheless. Machiavelli falls into this latter group. In Catherine Connors' interpretation of *Mandragola*, Lucrezia is the most Machiavellian character in the work. Connors confronts the complications and difficulties of a Machiavellian *principessa*. How does femininity (as Lucrezia uses feminine wiles to effect the re-founding of her household) go together with Machiavellian *virtù*, which seems to be pointedly masculine? Let me elaborate on how the two main themes in this volume come to light, and some of the ways in which the chapters reflect on them, individually and read together.

When reflecting on the first theme, two related questions emerge. Is there a special relationship between women and piety? And is religion

good for women, or does it confine them to the private sphere and help justify their lack of authority even in that secondary role? In the Greek, Roman and Christian traditions the virtue of women was understood to be a combination of faithfulness, modesty, and piety, as well as an unsullied reputation for these. The rape and subsequent suicide of Lucretia is a crucial symbol of (if not simply the catalyst for) Roman republicanism. (It is important to note that both Machiavelli and Montesquieu, who retell this story and who are two of the most influential historians of Rome, dismiss the importance of family and the integrity of women in the founding and maintenance of republicanism. Connors in her chapter on Machiavelli's *Mandragola* and Schaub in her chapter on Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Romans* both comment on this.) Christianity, as articulated by St. Augustine, rejects Lucretia as the symbol of female piety, and adopts instead the Virgin Mary. Purity of the body and the image of the *pietà* or permanent, chaste, motherly suffering replace the fiercely proud Roman matronly protection of one's own name, family and property.

But the piety of women in the history of Western political thought can just as easily be cast as the impiety of women–what I referred to above as the "nightmare mirror image" of pious and obedient women. Eve sets the tone in the Biblical tradition, while Helen, one can say, sets the tone for the Greek one. Kathrin Rosenfield's account of Clytemnestra, Jocasta, and Antigone delves into the ambiguities of the presentation of women in Greek tragedy. Clytemnestra, who may seem to be a defender of private piety and the righteous avenger of her daughter Iphigenia, is actually driven by irrational wrath and lasciviousness. Jocasta, sometimes cast as the dutiful if clueless Greek matriarch, readily engages in impieties, such as denying the truthfulness and accuracy of oracles, in order to hide even worse impieties: the (attempted) murder of her own child, followed by incest with the same. Antigone, the very picture of female piety and the guardian of the sanctity of the family, Rosenfield argues, isn't conventionally pious. She is motivated (at least in part) by public or queenly interests, and also by incestuous longings. Queen Esther, who lent her name to a book of the Bible that occasioned a Jewish holy day, isn't cut from the same cloth as these Greek figures of tragedy, but the tenor of her piety is problematic. Clifford Orwin discusses the complications of this Jewish heroine, who is a paragon of filial obedience, but whose dedication to her family and her people takes the form

of using her beauty and sexual appeal to work over a typically lazy and capricious eastern despot.

One could also speak of Machiavelli's impious Lucrezia, perfectly impious in her ability to maintain her reputation for piety, of Montesquieu's impious harem women, of Rousseau's Sophie and her failed piety, of Flaubert's Emma, but the impious women discussed above are striking for constituting the core of Greek religion and Biblical faith. The Book of Esther is a key Biblical text, and the Greek poets, particularly Homer and the tragedians, were understood to have special access to the divine, and their accounts of Greek religion were authoritative. All that has followed in the West can be understood as a confrontation with one or both of these traditions—as attempts to understand, rework or even to disown them (disavowals usually bear the mark of the repudiated tradition).

Although Orwin and Rosenfield take very different approaches in reflecting on two very different traditions, both chapters reveal that deep and lasting traditions are remarkably self-reflective.[9] The Book of Esther is not a straightforward tale of pious Esther in exile and subjected to domestic despotism, as the whole Jewish people is subjected to political despotism; not only are there serious questions about the nature of Esther's piety (which must be reconciled with the fact that she lives a life entirely apart from and in some contradiction with the law), but the role of God in this canonical Biblical text, if there is one at all, is ambiguous. Likewise, the poets of Greek tragedy aren't merely purveyors of ancient tradition; they are at one and the same time conduits of tradition and its scrutinizers.

So, the relationship between women and piety is complicated. Our female paragons aren't perfectly pious, nor are they simply weak, irrational, and lascivious. There is room for female strength and heroism (e.g. Antigone, Esther), which isn't to say that everyday Greek or Jewish women were expected or encouraged to behave heroically. All of these reflections call to mind the question of the appropriate female education and notions of female virtue according to which women ought to live.

Dana Jalbert Stauffer's chapter on Plato's *Laws* and Paul Ludwig's on Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* deal with the proper education of women. Stauffer looks at Plato's plan to educate women such that they are able to participate fully in the public life of the city, an education that necessarily includes military training. Ludwig considers Ischomachus' attempts to educate his wife with a view to marital partnership, if an unequal one.

In these Socratic dialogues, the possibility of female equality is broached, but not embraced. According to Plato, women would be the first to reject his proposed educational reforms that would have them abandon the private realm for the public one. For Plato the female question speaks to the stubborn nature of our attachment to the particular, to love of one's own, and to the manner in which we conjure up gods to defend these on our behalf. Women emerge as defenders of the private, but also speak to the stubbornness of male attachment to one's own rather than the good. Men who defend their city and household are in many respects no different than women who operate solely in the private sphere.

In the case of Xenophon's rendition of the idealistic Ischomachus' desire to run a fair-minded household, Ludwig discusses the hopes and fears that buoy his desire to have Chyrsilla, his wife, be faithful to him of her own free and informed will rather than as a result of compulsion. It turns out that the gods play two crucial roles: in Ischomachus' view they support the sphere of womanhood (even despite women's inferiority in what is supposedly her anointed realm), and the gods are the unspoken condition of Ischomachus' beneficence in allowing his wife more freedom than he must. Ludwig surmises that Ischomachus, the beneficent household ruler, understands himself to live in a world where gods will reward such nobility; the gods, masters of the world, are also beneficent. It seems, then, that the family—particularly the family that isn't simply a version of domestic despotism—relies on the belief in a just universe that protects the weak and rewards the strong for ruling with restraint.

Ludwig suggests that perhaps Xenophon had the ironic result of Chyrsilla's education in view when he presented Ischomachus' thoughts on household management: she begins her married life as a pious woman, but becomes liberated from the gods and from sexual propriety in the course of her enlightened wifely education. Several of the chapters in this work consider the goodness or badness of such liberation. Machiavelli and Montesquieu seem to support it, not least because they want to overturn ancient and Christian notions of virtue, female and male. Flaubert understands sensual and religious passions to be intimately related, particularly for women. Emma Bovary, who received an education equal parts pious and sensual (like many women did in the waning days of French Catholicism, when the Bible and the novels of Walter Scott were both *de rigeur* for young women), vacillated between adulterous passion and religious ecstasy. For Flaubert, this isn't necessarily a prob-

lem with a solution. He doesn't seem to think that the happiness of women, to the extent that he cares about this, depends on an education that honors traditional female virtues. In *Sentimental Education*, Madame Arnoux, the sweet and modest exemplar of female virtue, falls for the charms of the feckless Fredrick Moreau and is ruined by him.

Perhaps the most interesting cases to consider with respect to the question of the proper education for women are Heather King's account of Catharine Trotter's play *Love at a Loss*, Eve Grace on Rousseau, and Amy Bonnette on Jane Austen. Trotter, Rousseau and Austen have in common that they suggest the importance of serious moral education for women. King's chapter brings to our attention a poet who would be better known to us if she hadn't endured the invisibility that has afflicted female artists and thinkers through much of history. With this chapter we gain an extremely useful perspective on the effects of John Locke's teaching, perhaps even unintended by Locke, vis-à-vis his contract theory. While contemporary works such as Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* are at pains to demonstrate the deficiencies of contract theory from the point of view of the liberation of women, it is interesting to note Trotter's efforts to claim and take pride in what she viewed as high moral and intellectual standards usually applied only to men.

Bonnette's chapter follows Austen's account of the importance of a fine moral and religious education for boys and girls, but especially the latter in *Mansfield Park*. Bonnette recommends Austen as a serious writer who was a careful observer of the secularizing forces that were taking hold of society around her. Bonnette asks what on some level this collection as a whole asks, whether the secularizing tendencies of modern society are good. Are they good for women? Do we side with Fanny's upstanding morality or with Mary's laxness and worldliness? If Fanny's good judgment and moral sense appeal to us more, why is this the case? Bonnette invites us to revisit ancient poets and philosophers, Aristophanes and Plato especially, in order to reevaluate our understanding of the role of religion in the household and the city, and the costs of the marginalization of religion in modernity.

Rousseau, controversially, presents his Sophie's rigorous moral and religious education as a salve for her natural inequality. Eve Grace gives a nuanced and probing account of Rousseau's view of women in the context of his political philosophy. She makes sense of the apparent contradiction between Rousseau's commitment to equality and his willingness to subject women to inequality. Grace shows that Rousseau's reasons for

supporting a seemingly conventional education for women are not conventional. His aim, Grace argues, is to create romance in the family—which is not natural for men *or* women—in part by exaggerating women's natural disadvantages with respect to childrearing. He wants to create an incentive for women to bear disproportionately the burdens of family life on the basis of this "need," both because women will be benefited and because they will benefit society. Grace presents this complicated picture of Sophie's female virtue, and considers Rousseau's and her own reservations with respect to whether this situation is in fact good for Sophie and for the women she is supposed to inspire. Religion comes to light as Sophie's consolation, as a way of instructing her conscience to endure some of her difficult duties. Sophie's religious education is much more conventional than Emile's, perhaps because her submission to duty is more comprehensive than his. Rousseau gives new reasons for the submission of women to men, based, paradoxically, on the natural equality between the sexes and the natural distaste of both sexes for duty.

As outlined above, the second aim of this volume is to provide a view of the history of political thought as it comes into focus through the lens of women and religion. This lens offers us insights into the relationship between private and public realms, and between religion and public life. The Greek tragedians, Plato and Xenophon speak to the relationship between "manly" public life and "womanly" private life. Rosenfield gives an account of the way in which Greek tragedy was a venue for playing out the conflicts between these two spheres: domestic piety challenging and being challenged by the public and civic piety of men. Plato and Xenophon, as rendered by Stauffer and Ludwig respectively, speak to this question as well. Both are concerned with the limits of reason of men and women in public and private life. As discussed above, neither of them accepts the prevailing *nomoi*—or the boundaries within which it was acceptable to question the *nomoi*. While Plato does seem to suggest that women are stubbornly attached to private life, Stauffer points out that Plato doesn't simply affirm the traditional cloistering of women in the home. She argues that to a certain degree Plato wants to loosen the *nomoi* that attach women to the home, hearth and gods in the hope that the city becomes less concerned with upholding strict piety. This is all with a view to accommodating philosophy in the city, if only in speech.

Xenophon is equally radical in questioning the Greek *nomoi*. Ludwig focuses our attention on the ways in which Xenophon questions the received understanding of the distinctions between the supposedly supe-

rior, rational, male public life and the irrational, myth-driven realm of the private where women's nature sets the tone. According to this Greek view, the *polis* is the realm of noble republican rule; the household, on the other hand, is more clearly bound up with tyrannical rule—not least the rule of the gods, who help make bearable the need for compulsion in ruling, including the rule of husband over wife. Xenophon's Socrates doesn't make the same assumption the city does, and he scrutinizes both city and household. However radically both Plato and Xenophon question the Greek *nomoi*, at the heart of which one finds the rule of the gods who support family life and (more ambiguously) the city itself, they don't seek to enlighten society or to implement many of the reforms that they entertain in speech.

Machiavelli and Montesquieu, however, take their critiques of the religious and political orders of their day further and wish to effect the transformation of these orders. While the Socratics understand human beings to be stubbornly religious, Machiavelli and Montesquieu do not. Both of these modern philosophers respond to what they understand to be the problem of Christianity. Both note the replacement of Roman "masculinity" and warmongering with "effeminate" Christianity, and both, in somewhat different ways, seek to replace Christianity with new modes and orders. In Schaub's masterful teasing out of the theme of women and religion in Montesquieu's *Considerations*, she notes that he subtly but clearly links Christianity with effeminacy and with despotism. And Christian women emerge as fanatical obstacles to good government.

Both Machaivelli and Montesquieu, it seems, deploy women in the service of creating the kinds of mores and forms of government they hope to found. Machiavelli's Lucrezia defies both Roman and Christian versions of female virtue (as mentioned earlier), which were understood to consist in a combination of modesty, fidelity and piety. Montesquieu, according to Schaub, hopes that female coquetry and sociability can be used to combat the female piety so suited to Christian religious fanaticism. Machiavelli and Montesquieu deny the inherent religiosity of women as a means of undermining religion and hopes for transcendence in general. Could this be the incipient step to the eventual equality of the sexes, quite apart from the intentions of the philosophers in question?

Eve Grace's chapter on Rousseau helps us to understand another momentous turn in modern political philosophy. While the most one can say about Machiavelli's use of love in the *Mandragola* is that it becomes a handy weapon for Lucrezia in the re-founding of her household (this is