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Derval Conroy, ed., *Towards an Equality of the Sexes in Early Modern France*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. xii + 240 pp. £130.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9780367224929; £36.99 (pb). ISBN 9780367708467; £33.29 (eb). ISBN 9780429275203.

Review by Michael Moriarty, Cambridge University.

This volume contains a wide-ranging treatment of gender equality in early modern France. Its agenda is set out clearly and cogently in Derval Conroy's introduction, from which I pick out three key points. First, she observes that, although the history of debates about gender equality and inequality has long been studied, particularly over the last thirty years, the results of this scholarship have not been incorporated into a broader history of equality. This she sees as an index of "the impregnable nature of the canon of political thought" and of the power of disciplinary boundaries (p. 2). In the breadth of its subject matter and the depth of its analyses, the volume as a whole is a significant contribution to the task of eliminating these obstacles. Impressively scholarly and carefully argued, the chapters, taken together, provide solid ground for the contention, in Siep Stuurman's concluding chapter, that "the regime of male supremacy and female submission was still the norm to which most of the French paid allegiance, but its aura of 'naturalness' could no longer be taken for granted" (p. 213).

Secondly, the overall perspective goes beyond that of those studies that focus on the so-called *querelle des femmes*, the historical debate about the superiority or inferiority of one or the other sex. It is not to decry the value of such work to point out, as does Conroy, that "use of the term *la querelle des femmes* can be counterproductive in lending itself to a separation of the question of sexual politics from the broader canon of early modern political and philosophical thought," and thus reinforcing the marginalization of the study of gender equality (p. 3). Although there are chapters dealing with philosophical arguments about the equality of the sexes (it would be absurd to ignore these), there are also studies of how equality was explicitly or implicitly asserted or negotiated in a range of concrete social situations; and these make an essential contribution to the overall argument.

Thirdly, when gender equality is still such a burning issue, there is an obvious risk of misunderstanding early modern texts on the subject by measuring them against modern expectations of what such equality consists--of detecting inconsistencies or lapses whenever an early modern writer's discourse on equality fails to coincide with our own understanding of the concept. Conroy warns against such anachronism, urging that we should instead seek to understand how positions that might appear incompatible to us held no such incompatibility for an early modern writer--a certain understanding of gender equality may, for instance, have been

informed by a general sense of cosmic hierarchy. This is a sound methodological precept, and the individual contributors to the volume successfully evade the pitfalls of anachronism.

Turning now to the individual chapters, I begin with Giovanna Devincenzo's on Marie de Gournay, partly for chronological reasons, but more because she emphasizes the novelty of Gournay's position, in a way that is entirely relevant to the theme of the volume and, in particular, to Conroy's caveat about the term *querelle des femmes*. She notes that "most authors engaged in the debate regarding the relationship between the sexes approached the question in terms of either superiority or inferiority" (p. 61). On this account, scholars have sometimes contended that assertions of women's superiority are primarily rhetorical exercises, showing the humanistic ability to argue on both sides of a question, including the less favored side. But Gournay's fundamental principle is that "men and women are different but equal" (p. 61); this is not a claim that can be dismissed as mere rhetorical display. Devincenzo provides a convincing analysis of Gournay's argumentative strategy in *Égalité des hommes et des femmes*: Gournay adduces canonical texts, including Scripture, in favor of equality, often reading them against the grain of customary interpretations, and mobilizes examples from history of women who have excelled intellectually, not as exceptions, but as figures representative of their sex as a whole. This provides the basis for her claim that women should have educational opportunities equal to men's, and for a vision of "an intellectual community transcending gender, where women would play a part on the basis of scholarly merit" (p. 65). Devincenzo suggests that Gournay's assertion of female claims to equal participation in the intellectual sphere was an inspiration to the *précieuses*.

This theme of community has already emerged in the first three chapters, which deal with the Cartesian legacy. All mention Poulain de la Barre, whose advocacy of gender equality was certainly informed by his Cartesian commitment; but all focus on different aspects of his work and complement each other extremely well. Rebecca Wilkin opens her chapter by observing that "it has long been established that Cartesian philosophy contributed to late seventeenth-century vindications of gender equality which in turn informed notions of equality in the political philosophy of the Enlightenment" (p. 39): a point that is both justified and all the more striking in that some earlier feminist scholarship took a negative attitude to Descartes.[1] How Descartes's position is interpreted depends to a surprisingly large extent on the interpreter's view of a familiar crux: is the first sentence of the *Discours de la méthode* to be taken seriously or ironically? Wilkin takes the former view; Pellegrin, the latter. (For what it is worth, I agree with Wilkin.)

Geneviève Fraisse discusses Poulain de la Barre in connection with the concept of prejudice. (The title of her chapter is rather ungainly: surely the French expression *le temps du préjugé* would have been more clearly translated as "the time of prejudice.") As she points out, the subtitle of Poulain's treatise *De l'égalité des deux sexes* asserts the importance of ridding oneself of prejudices. In Descartes's texts, *praejudicium/préjugé* denotes the unexamined preconceptions, especially those acquired in infancy, that distort our thinking (see, for instance, *Principia philosophiae*, 1.71-72). There is no necessary link here with the now-current, more common sense of hostility towards some particular category of people.[2] So it is particularly striking that, as Fraisse argues, Poulain was the first to connect "sex" and "prejudice" (p. 13). She examines the implications of his statement that "the mind has no sex," and his espousal of a rigorous philosophical approach, rather than one imbued with the contemporary culture of *galanterie*, the code of refined social exchange between men and women, with an undercurrent of flirtation or even seduction. Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin examines Descartes's handling of questions of sexual difference, concluding

that “psychophysiology and, consequently, Cartesian morality are neutral as far as gender is concerned” (p. 27). But this does not apply to all his followers, and Pellegrin shows how, on the one hand, Malebranche’s conception of original sin leads him to emphasize gender difference, with negative implications for women, while Poulain’s leads him to assert difference in another way, presenting women as less affected by original sin and as ethically superior to men. Rebecca Wilkin examines the construction of intellectual communities in Cartesian philosophy. Since Descartes is implicitly addressing the individual who is prepared to forsake the false certainties of public opinion, he “gestures towards a community potentially inclusive of women as well as men” (p. 43). Poulain is more aware of the obstacles to women’s participation in intellectual activity; whereas in the *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* Fontenelle famously makes the new philosophy available to women but as listeners, rather than participants: “He accommodated a curious, feminised public to a professional corps of (male) knowledge-seekers” (p. 53).

A number of chapters deal with actual communities, religious or secular, all-female or mixed. Heidi Keller-Lapp discusses the “fantasy narrative” (an expression of Joan Scott’s) underpinning Marie de l’Incarnation’s vision of her missionary activity. Marie de l’Incarnation was, as it were, reconstituting an earlier period when female religious communities had worked hand-in-hand with the Jesuits, incurring the hostile label of “Jesuitesses.” Her activity was legitimized by the fact that Jesuit missionaries in North America had called for pious women to assist them (since they themselves could not minister to indigenous women and girls); they recognized the women’s ministry as essentially one with their own. Carol Baxter’s study of the nuns of Port-Royal highlights “instances where nuns were exercising agency beyond the prescribed norms for women or for nuns” (p. 113). She suggests that their conception of themselves as a religious elite empowered them on occasion to challenge gender norms and religious conventions (a good example of Conroy’s point about the coexistence of notions of equality and hierarchy). When pressured to sign the anti-Jansenist formulary, they claimed, as did their male defenders, to be too ignorant to understand the theological issues; but this was doubtless a rhetorical strategy to dispense them from submission to external authority. They were not defending their rights as women, yet “their readiness to act in defence of a religious cause demonstrates a willingness to exercise female agency in ways that subverted traditional gender roles” (p. 120).

It is a far cry from Port-Royal to the world of theatre. No one knows more than Jan Clarke about the workings of Paris theatre companies: her meticulous examination of the range of the Comédie-Française’s activity, including the invisible operations that kept the whole enterprise going, shows that women participated on pretty equal terms with men, and that their activities at all levels were indispensable. There is no straightforward progression or regression here: in the 1680s the actresses seem to have stayed away from play readings and administrative meetings, which they were entitled to attend; but by the 1690s, their attendance had risen again. Edwige Keller-Rahbé studies the book trade, which might seem unpromising territory: “The unequal access of women to print in the early modern period is a sociologically recognised fact, informed by precise scholarly research” (p. 186). But this inequality was somewhat mitigated by the system of royal *privilèges*, by which the beneficiary was granted both permission to print a given work and exclusive rights over it for a specified period. Although the booksellers/printers and the authors in question were predominantly male, there was nothing in the legal framework of the *privilège* that excluded women, either as publishers or as authors of the work. Keller-Rahbé instances privileges granted jointly to a husband-and-wife couple of authors, the classical scholars André Dacier and Anne Le Fèvre. Her conclusion is measured, but clear: “Book

privileges render visible the move toward both recognising and empowering women within the book and publishing trades” (p. 202).

Within the more informal community of the salon, Elizabeth C. Goldsmith deals with ties between individuals, namely, the friendships between the aristocratic essayist Charles de Saint-Évremond and two women, both salon hostesses who resolutely refused to conform to gender expectations and established codes of morality: Hortense Mancini, duchesse Mazarin, like Saint-Évremond an exile in London, whose salon was one of the most important cultural spaces in the capital; and Ninon de Lenclos, whom Saint-Évremond had left behind in Paris. Again, we see that early modern discourses of equality can coexist with discourses of hierarchy. As Goldsmith says, Saint-Évremond cannot be seen as “a promoter of equality for women in general” (p. 140). In fact, one might add, his scheme of social and cultural values is fundamentally exclusive and elitist. Nonetheless, he implicitly aligned himself with the promoters of equality both in his practice of friendship with certain women, and his reflections thereon. His relationships with these women informed a philosophy of friendship capable of accommodating and valuing difference of gender. His letters to the much younger Hortense show his admiration both for her personality, celebrating its militant “Amazonian” side, and for her achievement in creating a distinctive social space. In the correspondence with Ninon, we see both the man and the woman reflecting on the aging process, presented, in the light of modern gerontology, as “a natural move towards gender equality” (p. 146).

Standing above all communities in the early modern state was the figure of the ruler. Derval Conroy’s own chapter examines the gendered dimension of discourses on the virtues of the ideal prince. As she points out, within the tradition of virtue ethics, there are two contrary tendencies: one, to assert that women have an equal capacity with men both for virtue in general and for the individual virtues; the other, to assign different virtues to men and to women. This tension provides the framework for her analysis of eulogies of the Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia (1566-1633), joint ruler of the Spanish Netherlands with her husband Albert, and sole ruler after his death. Here it is the egalitarian strand that prevails: Conroy shows how these eulogies systematically record the Archduchess’s possession of all the virtues of the ideal ruler, so as to make her an exemplary figure, not only for female but for male sovereigns.

In the final chapter, Siep Stuurman recapitulates some of the arguments for equality discussed in more detail in earlier chapters, as a preliminary to fulfilling one of the key desiderata of the introduction: connecting the debate on gender equality with more general debates about equality in the canonical political theory of the Enlightenment. While making it clear that such figures as Montesquieu, Diderot, Rousseau, and Raynal cannot be seen as straightforwardly advocating gender equality (Rousseau, as is well known, vigorously rejected the idea), Stuurman makes a good case for the view that they had to come to terms with the seventeenth-century writers’ arguments for equality. He provides an interesting comparative discussion of eighteenth-century Chinese women writers in China who challenged the traditional limitations imposed upon them; although, he maintains, they were not arguing for equality in the way that European writers were. There are issues here in comparative cultural and intellectual history that would require not one but many other volumes to deal with. But this volume achieves a great deal in highlighting both abstract argumentation for equality and concrete relationships of equality or near-equality in early modern France. It paves the way for future studies that will integrate its findings into, and thereby transform, the history of early modern political thought.

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## NOTES

[1] Susan R. Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1993).

[2] Post-classical Latin usage does in fact acknowledge the sense "damage, disadvantage, prejudice." See Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), s.v. "praejudicium."

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