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Desmond M. Clarke (translator and editor)

The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century

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Reviewed by Karen Detlefsen, 2015

Narrated by Kelsey Borrowman

For many decades, scholarship and especially teaching in early modern philosophy has been dominated by what we might call the standard narrative. According to this narrative, there were the seventeenth-century rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz), followed by a move to empiricism in the eighteenth century (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume), and then Kant came along, synthesized the two great traditions, and paved the way for the emergence of modern philosophy. It is a progressive story, with Kant the synthesizer at the telos, and it focuses squarely on (especially) epistemology and metaphysics. This standard narrative began to erode in the 1970s, at least in research even if less dramatically in teaching, with an expansion of interests covering new topics, notably natural philosophy (roughly science) and value theory. Consequently, philosophical attention has been directed at new figures, new texts of long-studied figures, and occasionally genres and methods that do not fit the mold of contemporary Anglo-analytic philosophy.

This trend to greater diversity and inclusion has recently seen a notable explosion in interest paid to early modern women philosophers and their works, many of which are significantly divergent from what we may consider to be typical philosophical treatises. Many of these women were especially interested in themes of particular interest to women and their seventeenth-century roles, given, as Desmond Clarke points out in this volume, the "relatively limited range of lifestyle options available [to them] . . . including marriage, life in a convent, or employment as a servant" (4). This new trend in early modern scholarship promises much creative expansion in philosophy, including how we think about the nature of our own discipline in past centuries. It also promises to contribute many interesting insights to the history of feminism.

Desmond Clarke's book is an exemplary and welcome addition to this trend. It focuses on a specific topic--the *querelle des femmes* concerned with theorists arguing for the equality of the sexes--and it traces the ways this topic was treated by three crucial thinkers of the seventeenth century. Particularly refreshing is Clarke's inclusion of a male feminist--Poulain de la Barre (1647-1723)--among the thinkers in the book, along with Marie le Jars de Gournay (1568-1645) and Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678). Clarke has translated from Latin and French a number of texts and some correspondence directly concerned with the debate surrounding the equality of the sexes, and he has written a lengthy introduction to the texts that is superb and stimulating, and that blends the best of philosophical analysis with a thorough grip on the cultural and theological context in which the ideas were forged. The result is a book that will be of interest to philosophers, intellectual historians, educational theorists, and those interested in feminism and women's studies. Researchers will find it helpful as an introduction to the three thinkers, especially since Clarke has provided a helpful supplement of further reading (213-16). But where I think the text will make a real impact is in teaching (at all levels), for it makes accessible for students a number of interesting texts not previously available in English. But this, in turn, will have an eventual impact on research, one hopes, for the more students taught about philosophy in the early modern period through new and exciting narratives involving women and men writing about concerns central to women's lives, the more this will surely transform the way future scholars think and write about the seventeenth century.

One initially striking feature of the book is that it brings together three authors who offer a range and variety of arguments in favor of women's equality, arguments that are sometimes quite at odds with one another. One shared idea only serves to underscore this point, because the ways this idea is manifest in the three thinkers are quite diverse. This is the idea of the role of authority in our thinking about the issue of gender equality. Gournay, in *The Equality of Men and Women* (first edition 1622), claims to rely solely on "the authority of God himself" (55), implying no reliance at all on human authority. Still, she nonetheless also

relies upon the beliefs of ancient authors?and thus, in some sense, to their authority?when she claims that the "unique form and specific characteristic of this [human] animal consists only in the rational soul," even while she refuses to reach the sexist conclusion many Scholastics nonetheless reach about female inferiority. Gournay herself says that the ancient ontology of the human means that anyone who argues for the superiority of men is led into an absurdity, for "[m]an and woman are so much one that, if man is more than a woman, then woman is more than a man" (65). Van Schurman, too, is a devoted Christian who relies heavily (like Gournay) on biblical authority and the authority of God, but she is explicit in saying that one ought not to follow the supposed authority of other people in biblical interpretation, for the range of opposing religions only establishes that not all the so-called authorities of these warring religions can be right (29). As with Gournay, she turns to historical sources of philosophical authority for her arguments in favor of women's equality. For example, in *A Dissertation on the Natural Capacity of Women for Study and Learning* (1641), she too chooses the Scholastic doctrine of men and women's shared rational soul, and she too resists the sexist conclusions others in this tradition had reached about women being merely deformed men (82). It is Poulain who takes the anti-authoritarianism the furthest, for in *A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes* (1673), he claims to "recognize no authority here apart from the authority of reason and sound judgment. . . . Scripture does not say a single word about inequality," and he eschews the ideas of "famous men" as well (200).

As should be evident, religious arguments for women's equality also play different roles for these thinkers. Gournay relies heavily on evidence from Scripture in order to make her points in favor of the equality thesis (for example, 65; 73). Van Schurman focuses on the importance of the Christian life for both men and women equally, and perhaps most significantly, she separates theology proper from "the historical, social, and linguistic contingencies in which [Scripture] was expressed" (29). This latter point allows her to show how various parties have erroneously used Scripture to argue for gendered conclusions that are unsupported by Scripture--and that are clearly to women's disadvantage. Once again, she places interpretation of the Scripture squarely in the individual's--and not a Church authority's--hands. Given Poulain's rejection of all forms of authority altogether (save one's own reason, of course), it is no surprise that he suggests we read the Bible in accordance with sound reason, that is, "according to the same rules, by which one reads and ought to read all good books . . . to examine and weigh up everything as if no one else had read or understood it before" (from *La doctrine des Protestans*, cited in Clarke's introduction, 36-37). But for Poulain, sound reason of the individual is the true path to understanding the natures of men and women, and ultimately, to understanding their natural equality.

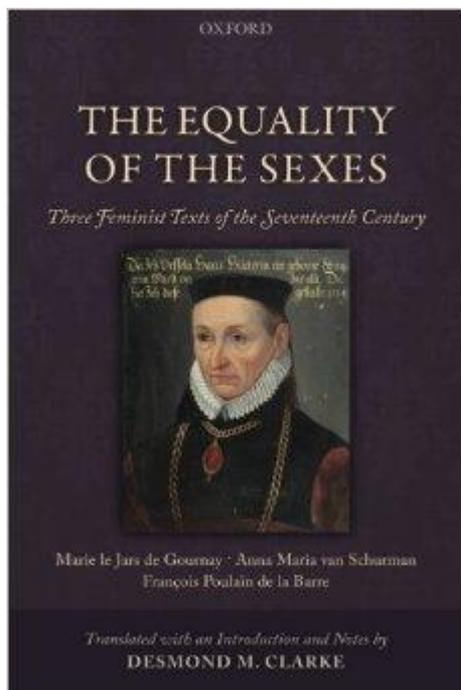
A final theme that one can trace through all three authors is that of the importance of education to women's full possession of their true natural equality. This theme is approached by Gournay, who asks rhetorically "why would the education of women, in literary and social studies, not bridge the gap that is usually found between the minds of men and women?" (60), and the topic is taken up full force by van Schurman and Poulain. Van Schurman, once again, has her focus squarely on the centrality of the Christian life, and the importance of education therein (in her 1641 *Dissertation*). It is true that in her later autobiography, the *Eukleria seu Melioris Partis Electio* (1673), she repudiated the role of learning for properly living the Christian life, favoring instead direct experience of God's love (117). But even here she maintains gender equality, pushing for the importance of celebrating God's works over the role of education for both men and women alike, a point she underscores in her 1648 correspondence with André Rivet (106). Poulain offers the suggestion--bracingly daring for the seventeenth century--that we should see how far equality of education can go in ameliorating the inequality of men and women. Assuming that his hypothesis of gender equality will be proved correct by the educational experiment, he then suggests that the well-educated woman ought to be granted full access to all forms of human life, including professions hitherto open exclusively to men (132). Like Gournay and van Schurman before him, he is careful to note that not all women are capable of excelling at challenging education and difficult careers--but then, neither are all men capable of rising to these challenges.

There are many more themes and ideas ripe for probing and discussion in these rich works. In addition to those works cited above, Clarke has also translated Gournay's *The Ladies' Complaint* (1626), and excerpts

from Poulain's *Conversation concerning the Education of Ladies* (1671). In addition to the themes noted above, there are interesting ideas about, among other themes, the relation between (sexed) bodies and rational minds, and the role of powerful interests in the control of knowledge and assumptions at play in arguments surrounding the *querelle des femmes*.

Also intriguing is the question of whether, and how, we can call figures such as these three individuals "feminists." Clarke does; the subtitle of the book includes the telling phrase "feminist texts." In his "Notes on the Texts and Translations," he defends this choice by mentioning that the authors "argue for women's rights of equal access to educational opportunities; and fundamentally, they claim that women in general are equal to men" (xiii). These facts do indeed point to these seventeenth-century thinkers as feminist, especially given the social background within which they were writing. At the same time, the claim of their feminism is somewhat problematic given the lack of attention paid to class inequalities; many seventeenth-century writers interested in pushing women's natural equality were also quite accepting of their social inequality (van Schurman is a case in point, 81), and by the fact that theoretical advancements were sometimes not coupled with any viable ideas on how to bring about meaningful social change. Obviously, massive social movements such as feminism are long in the making, so perhaps to locate figures such as Gournay, van Schurman, and Poulain near the beginning of this long and ongoing social movement is appropriate, and we can admire them for sowing the seeds of feminism in the forms it takes today. Indeed, much in these pages seems strikingly more modern than one might expect from texts written about 350 years ago. This is enlightening, for it shows that many feminist ideas that seem relatively contemporary were already in public discourse centuries ago. That these ideas have been lost for so long is, in itself, of significant interest for those interested in thinking about canon-formation in philosophy. That, more and more often, texts like these are being made available to us in modern editions is a welcome sign of the evolution of philosophical scholarship on the early modern period toward greater richness, diversity, and inclusiveness. Clarke has done us a great service in bringing these philosophers' ideas to a broader audience.

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