

**ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CANON:  
THE MYTH OF THE LONE FEMALE PHILOSOPHER, AND  
WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

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**Abstract:** Women philosophers of the past, because they tended not to engage with each other much, are often perceived as isolated from ongoing philosophical dialogues. This has led—directly and indirectly—to their exclusion from courses in the history of philosophy. This article explores three ways in which we could solve this problem. The first is to create a course in early modern philosophy that focuses solely or mostly on female philosophers, using conceptual and thematic ties such as a concern for education and a focus on ethics and politics. The second is to introduce women authors as dialoguing with the usual canonical suspects: Cavendish with Hobbes, Elisabeth of Bohemia with Descartes, Masham and Astell with Locke, Conway with Leibniz, and so on. The article argues that both methods have significant shortcomings, and it suggests a third, consisting in widening the traditional approach to structuring courses in early modern philosophy.

Keywords: canon, Héloïse, Christine de Pizan, Gabrielle Suchon, Mary Wollstonecraft, women philosophers.

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### 1. The Challenge

There are many reasons why texts by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women philosophers are left out of history of philosophy courses. Some of them are bad reasons that reflect poorly on professional philosophy, and on the educational choices we make. I won't address these here. Instead, I would like to focus on a difficulty that those attempting, in good faith, to integrate texts by women into their courses might actually encounter. And I would like to suggest a way to address this difficulty.

In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, dating from 1405, Christine de Pizan pictures herself desolate as a result of the blatant sexism she finds in her own library. Three angelic ladies come to her and encourage her to fight back by building an allegorical city, a literary fortress where women may flourish according to their capacities for virtue and wisdom, away from stifling male slanders. When one of the three visitors, Lady Rectitude, suggests that Christine construct philosophical arguments refuting the slandering of women's character and intellectual capacities, Christine asks her: Why has no other woman done it before? Why am I the first woman to philosophize about women's condition?

(Brown-Grant 1999, 53). Christine's surprise is not simply the product of ignorance: throughout her *Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine is at pains to bring out female figures in history that she deems exceptional in terms of leadership, technological innovations, scientific advancement, military achievement, domestic virtue, and religious faith. Yet she fails to mention the one woman philosopher who was well known at the time she wrote, and who might well have deserved the title of defender of womankind: Héloïse of Argenteuil. In her writings, Héloïse fought for her right to be perceived as a thinking and free agent, not one who was swayed by her bodily desires and whose only achievement was to have conquered those. She also fought for the right of the nuns she was in charge of to receive a proper education, not simply one that would enable them to make an informed choice when taking orders but one that would also allow them to flourish as scholars once they had taken orders. Héloïse, who in her convent did build a City of Ladies of sorts, deserved to be named by Christine.

Fast-forward another two and a half centuries to the seventeenth century and Gabrielle Suchon, a self-taught renegade nun who in the preface to her *Treatise on Ethics and Politics*, in which she discusses “the privations that persons of the sex endure” (Stanton and Wilkin 2010, 85), writes: “Women have not yet plied their pens in defense of their cause. . . . I was therefore obliged to look for my own path in this vast field of women's suffering, so full of brambles and thorns” (Stanton and Wilkin 2010, 83). The editors of Suchon's text note that “Suchon seems to negate the entire body of pro-woman female writers of the *Querelle des Femmes* from Christine de Pizan to Marguerite Buffet, which is difficult to comprehend, given her vast range of reading” (Stanton and Wilkin 2010, 15). And yet, Suchon, like Christine before her, portrays herself as the first and only champion of the female cause. In contrast to Suchon and Christine, we must bring up the example of Anna Maria van Schurman, who engaged in philosophical correspondence with many of her seventeenth-century contemporaries, male and female, including Marie de Gournay, Madeleine de Scudery, and Elizabeth of Bohemia (Larsen 2008). Not all women philosophers, clearly, failed to exchange their ideas with other women. But clearly many did, and less than a century after Suchon asserted herself the one and only, it is Mary Wollstonecraft's turn to appoint herself the saviour of her sex. Like her predecessors Wollstonecraft fails to recognize any past female philosophers. She reserves her praise for a few of her contemporaries, acknowledging their strength of character and intellect, such as Catherine Macaulay and surprisingly—as he was in fact a man and made no secret of it—Madame d'Eon.<sup>1</sup> Later, as Stanton and Wilkin observe (2010,

<sup>1</sup> Wollstonecraft does mention Héloïse at several points in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, but always as a maligned heroine, never as a thinker in her own right; see Wollstonecraft 1993, 200, 203–4.

13 n. 46), Simone de Beauvoir sets herself up as a pioneer of philosophical feminism, failing to take notice, at least in *The Second Sex*, of any of her predecessors.

Based on such evidence, one might well be tempted to think that women philosophers, when they write about their own condition as women, keep reinventing the wheel. They appear to be blind to each other and posit themselves, always, as the first or the only philosopher to have taken up the all-important “woman question,” that is, the question whether women are human beings in the same way that men are, whether they have been treated as such in the past, and how to go about ensuring that they will be in the future.

This state of affairs has consequences that go beyond the philosophical history of feminism: women writers who did not cite each other when discussing the woman question did not do so in other areas of philosophy either. Thus their isolation affected the history of women’s philosophical output as a whole. The woman question is sometimes portrayed as being apart from other—more central—areas of philosophical discourse. An instance of this assumption is Mary Warnock’s preface to her collection *Women Philosophers*, in which Warnock states that a number of women writers were excluded on the grounds that their arguments were not “truly universal” because they focused on the condition of women rather than “the human condition” (Warnock 1996, xxix–xxxiv). Yet one cannot discuss questions pertaining to the condition of women without at least attempting to settle on other questions that male philosophers too contemplate, namely, what it is to be human, what humans should expect from each other qua humans, and how best to promote or encourage the right sort of behaviour, through education and social and political arrangements. Inevitably, philosophers who address the woman question also address central questions in ethics and political philosophy, as well as those they encounter along the way of defining humanity—metaphysical, theological, social, biological. In other words, philosophers who write on the woman question address many of the same central philosophical questions that more canonical philosophers do. Thus the range of writings by women philosophers excluded from the history of the discipline, whether by their own peers or by others, is much wider than the prehistory of feminism.

Because some women in the history of philosophy had a tendency not to engage each other directly, one might worry that they end up repeating the same arguments over and over again. Fortunately, there are enough and sufficiently varied ways to react philosophically to the various injustices perpetrated against women throughout the ages that the philosophers who did so did not repeat themselves. Christine de Pizan’s claims and the arguments she uses to defend them are very different from those of Héloïse, if only because Héloïse is thinking of a woman’s condition inside a convent, whereas Christine’s woman is part of the body politic, even if sometimes only as a supportive wife and mother. Suchon more than her

two predecessors is able to link women's oppression to the poor quality of the education they receive, and to suggest an educational program that would develop human nature at its best in both men and women. Wollstonecraft, though she would no doubt have agreed with Suchon—had she read her—on the grounds that she too spent a great deal of her writing career defending educational reforms, especially for women, goes yet further and asks for a revolution in society's treatment of women, asking her French neighbours to grant women a place in their newly founded republic.

Ideas move with their times, and it would have been surprising to find women philosophers repeating each other's arguments century after century because they had not read each other. The realities and ideologies of their times shaped their thought, just as much as they did the thought of their male counterparts. Héloïse's horizon was defined by religion and scholarship, Christine de Pizan's by the need to make the country a safe place and to regain values that would contribute to that; for Suchon, there were the growing concerns of education, and how that would best be achieved for boys and girls, and for Wollstonecraft, there were republicanism, revolution, and the anti-slavery movements. One might even argue that their not knowing each other's work had very little effect on the progress of feminist thought, as far as individual women's productions are concerned—though of course had works by women been more widely known and discussed earlier on in our history, feminism would probably have advanced faster. All this brings us to the following conclusion: that it shouldn't matter to us that these women were writing in isolation from each other. Their texts are still valuable, and deserve to be more widely studied in philosophy courses.

Yet whenever I have raised the possibility with colleagues of including women authors in history of philosophy courses, the isolation of these philosophers is often cited—directly or indirectly—as a reason not to include them. To create a course in the history of philosophy is generally not simply to prepare a survey of those texts we regard as important or interesting. Especially in the case of early modern courses, instructors feel they are bound by the Kantian analysis of that period into the rationalist and the empiricist movements. Texts have to fit within that existing narrative, and because it is to some extent predetermined that certain authors are representative of either the rationalists or the empiricists, one must include them—that is, one must include Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, and one must talk about Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. And if we choose to exclude one, *he* can only be replaced by a writer whose work is similar enough that it can hold the same place in the curriculum. But even in the case of a course that surveys the history of early modern philosophy without wishing to impose the somewhat artificial division between rationalists and empiricists, it is still unlikely that there will be space for women such as Suchon and Wollstonecraft—partly because their focus is

less on metaphysics and more on ethics, politics, and the philosophy of education, but mostly, perhaps, because they do not appear to fit in any narrative one might choose to spin about the selected texts.

Whatever the cause of this—and we'll go into this in the next section—the fact that women philosophers appear to be isolated and do not belong either to an established tradition or to a dialogue with other philosophers (even other women philosophers), the result is that it is difficult to find a place for them in the curriculum. It is not enough simply to include a text by a woman; one also has to create the narrative that ties it to the other texts discussed in the course. I want to explore three ways in which we could attempt to solve this problem. The first is to create a course in early modern philosophy that focuses solely or mostly on female philosophers, using the sort of conceptual ties I mentioned in my introductory comments on Héloïse, Christine de Pizan, Suchon, and Wollstonecraft. The second is to introduce women authors as dialoguing with the usual canonical suspects: Cavendish with Hobbes, Elizabeth of Bohemia with Descartes, Masham and Astell with Locke, Conway with Leibniz, and so on.<sup>2</sup> I argue in sections 3 and 4 that both methods though incredibly valuable also have significant shortcomings, and I suggest a third, in section 5, which I believe may overall be more successful, consisting in widening the traditional approach to structuring courses in early modern philosophy.

## **2. From Socrates to the Citation Indexes: Where Did the Women Go?**

Philosophy, as we teach it, is a dialogue. We start with Plato's dialogues because the kind of exchange Plato describes between Socrates and others models something important about how we want students to do philosophy. We discourage students from answering essay questions in the void, as it were, without having read the relevant literature—even though that is what some of them expect philosophy will be like and are often disappointed, sometimes even put off. Later on, we are told that a publishable piece of philosophical writing is one that takes into account and responds to a great chunk of the relevant literature. We then measure the success of an article by how often it has been cited—and for some of us, this even helps determine the size of our salary. Given all this, it is quite natural that we should encourage a dialogue culture from the very beginning. In the teaching of the history of philosophy this translates as an effort to teach the works of philosophers who at least appear to be engaging with each other's arguments. This explains why, even though most didn't meet, we often portray early modern philosophers as engaged in dialogue with each other. But even in cases where they indeed were—some corresponded, and Hume, at least, read and cited Locke, Berkeley, and Malebranche—by

<sup>2</sup> This is the tactic used by Warren 2009.

isolating them, taking them out of their historical context, we create an artificial dialogue, editing out all contributions from more direct interlocutors. At the same time as we truncate history, we fail our students by not encouraging subtle readings of the text but instead picking out pre-digested clues. One very valuable way of reading any philosophy, whether historical or not, is to keep an open mind about what assumptions, problems, and arguments are part of the text's background. Many successful philosophers do well because they can find unusual ways of responding to arguments, and thereby open the way for new debates. By teaching the history of philosophy as a set narrative, we lose an opportunity to train students in this valuable skill; we take away from them the opportunity of developing a more subtle approach to interpreting arguments.

What follows from this is a reluctance to consider as important philosophers who were not demonstrably part of any such dialogues. This reluctance stems from something more than just the desire to set the right kind of example: a certain moral disapproval is attached to those writers who appear to be out of the loop of the great ongoing philosophical dialogue. They are seen as lacking the same sort of epistemic virtue that first-year students sometimes lack, the desire to engage and the ability to recognize that others have said important things that we need to take into account. Women philosophers, when they are excluded from history of philosophy courses, are often accused of lacking these virtues. Because they did not know or wish to engage with their contemporaries and predecessors, they are necessarily marginal, and it is, in a way, their own fault that they are now excluded.

I want to suggest that this is very much an attitude of blaming the victim, and that before we assign epistemic blame we need to look for any epistemic injustice that may have been committed against women philosophers of the past. Miranda Fricker argues in *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007) that there is at least one area in which ethical and intellectual virtues and vices meet, and that is the way we treat people in their capacity as knowers. There is a strong sense in which philosophical writing is a sort of testimony, a passing on of knowledge, and if it is, then the fact that women's philosophical writings are less likely to be published or cited (Healy 2013) is a good candidate for epistemic injustice. And this tendency to pay less respect to women's writings certainly seems to have been a feature of the history of philosophy, which, I argue, is a large part of the reason they are not part of a dialogue. No matter that there were women philosophers as far back as antiquity, there never were as many as there were men philosophers, so the dialogue would always have been led by the men, and the women included or not (Plant 2004). This is no doubt an injustice: none of these men made sufficient effort to acknowledge the work of their female counterparts, even when they did engage with them: for instance, Mill did not co-sign any of his books with Harriet Taylor, despite acknowledging her share in his work,

and he doesn't seem inclined to grant her much authority besides influence and the occasional idea for a chapter. He even appears to appropriate the one piece we are confident she wrote herself, "The Enfranchisement of Women," published in 1861 in the *Westminster Review*.<sup>3</sup>

We might accuse male philosophers of the past of injustice in their not acknowledging that women were producing texts and arguments of philosophical importance. But if, as we saw, women too ignored each other's work, does this not suggest that their work was in fact not worthy of notice and that therefore no injustice was done? Was it simply the case that these women's productions were "never quite good enough" to attract the interest of real philosophers? To add to that suspicion, it must be noted that many works by women philosophers do not fit the treatise model: Héloïse wrote letters, Christine de Pizan's work is by turns autobiographical and allegorical, Wollstonecraft wrote philosophical novels and (book-sized) pamphlets.<sup>4</sup>

There are in fact a variety of very good reasons why the few female philosophers of the past might not have engaged with each other. The most obvious is probably the desire to fit in with a contemporary audience, which usually means a male audience. When Harriet Taylor writes, "Great thinkers indeed, at different times, from Plato to Condorcet, besides some of the most eminent names of the present age, have made emphatic protests in favor of the equality of women" (Pyle 1995, 16), and thereby fails to acknowledge even Wollstonecraft, whose arguments she follows very closely, she is probably trying to appeal to the public's respect for those names. Claiming an alliance with Plato and Condorcet (even with the latter's associations with the French Revolution) is a better tactic than referring to Wollstonecraft, who had lost all credibility thanks to her husband William Godwin's intimate revelations after her death (she had a child out of wedlock and twice attempted suicide). In the same way, it is plausible that Christine de Pizan, who was concerned with showing that her defence of women's virtues and intellectual capacities did not entail any threat to the status quo, might not have wished to add Héloïse to her list of virtuous women: anyone who had read Héloïse's (then very popular) letters would have been aware of her refusal to marry, even when she found that she was pregnant by Abelard, and later her strong reluctance to give up her sexuality, even in the convent (Mews 2005). An author wishing to vindicate women's virtue, and even to argue that women should be granted the same social and political rights as men, would do well to steer clear of women who are not deemed "respectable."

<sup>3</sup> For Taylor's article see Pyle 1995. For Mill's appropriation of Taylor's piece see Mineka and Lindley 1972, 13, 55–56, 65–65, 190.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of how women philosophers of the past often wrote in different formats, see Villanueva Gardner 2000.



A second reason women philosophers did not engage with each other is the very same reason we know so little about them. Works by women philosophers were simply not published, distributed, and preserved with the same care as those of their male counterparts. The best way for a philosophical work to survive the ages is that it should not only be read but also referred to, and because male writers were more reluctant to refer to works by women authors, those works survived less well and were forgotten more quickly. During her lifetime, Christine de Pizan was responsible for the production, reproduction, and distribution of her works. In this she was very successful. But her success did not outlive her, and we find very few references to her in later works. Similarly, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* sold very well during her lifetime, but soon after her death it fell into oblivion, with no further editions and no discussion of her work even by writers on feminism. Gabrielle Suchon remained very much unknown until the 1970s, when her work was rediscovered by feminist writers. To those who have been following recent discussions on citation practices in philosophy, the fact that women philosophers of the past were not included in mainstream philosophical discussions should come as no surprise: it is still the case that works by women are cited proportionally far less than works by men. The bias that was effective then is still going strong (Healy 2013).

Despite the fact that women philosophers of the past were very much excluded from the inner circles of philosophical debate, it is nonetheless a bit of a stretch to talk about a mainstream philosophical conversation going on between men while women were writing in complete isolation. Whereas male philosophers did read each other, occasionally comment on each other's work, and cite each other, we tend to represent this conversation as rather more active than it in fact was when we teach the history of philosophy. It would not be surprising to hear that some students left their history classes with a picture in their minds of Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza sitting together in café in Boulogne, while Berkeley, Locke, and Hume were on the other side of the Channel, each group plotting against the other. We sometimes gloss over the distances that separated philosophers, geographical and historical, and spend little time exploring the ways in which books had to be manufactured and translated, how they travelled from one country to another, and how authors who had never met communicated with each other, often through a third party. In fact, if we do look at the finer-grained connections, we often find that they involve women philosophers, women who helped refine arguments by putting forward objections, as Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia did for Descartes, instigating dialogues on difficult arguments, as Maria van Herbert did with Kant (see Langton 1992), or women facilitating philosophical debates by holding salons, by translating important new works, as Sophie de Grouchy did in revolutionary Paris (see Dawson 1991), or again by composing arguments for entire chapters and perhaps even



providing drafts for complete texts, as Harriet Taylor did for Mill. The large picture of the philosophical networks of history only pick out the men, but the finer grid shows that women were indeed part of the conversation.

One less palatable reason women appear to be excluded from the great philosophical dialogues is that their ideas, far from appearing unworthy of comment to male philosophers who come across them, look like easy pickings. One of the great unsung (and, to be fair, as yet unverified) scandals of the history of philosophy is the possible plagiarism of Suchon by Rousseau, which is hinted at by Michèle Le Doeuff in *The Sex of Knowing*.<sup>5</sup> Suchon's arguments that "rational self-education, personal autonomy and an emphasis on conscience are goods in themselves, for all and not just as they apply to women," in part derived from her own experience as an autodidact (Stanton and Wilkin 2010, liv) and seem like a most probable influence on Rousseau's educational writings (Le Doeuff 2003, 45). Moreover, Le Doeuff notes that during the time Rousseau was most likely to have come across Suchon's books—in Madame de Warens's library at Les Charmettes—his writings had a distinct feminist flavour, suggesting that women were not free because of "the tyranny of men" and promising to bring to light the role played by women in "the Republic of letters" (Le Doeuff 2003, 44, 46).<sup>6</sup>

Autonomy, self-education, and the idea that a tutor must simply place students in the way of acquiring knowledge for themselves are certainly a large part of Rousseau's philosophy of education (Okin 1979, 395ff.). Unfortunately, by the time Rousseau came to replicate Suchon's arguments, in his *Émile*, the feminist flavour was lost, and arguments that had been meant as universal, but starting from observations about women's needs and experience, now excluded women. In fact, in *Émile*, Rousseau argues that men and women have such different natures that it would be harmful to women to expose them to the same education as men. Instead, we should concentrate on teaching women to be entertaining and pretty and to develop those skills that will keep them that way (such as dress making) (Rousseau 1992, 445).

Mary Wollstonecraft devoted much of her philosophical energy both to arguing against Rousseau that women were essentially different from men and to showing that applying his educational model to women would both improve women's condition and benefit society as a whole (Reuter 2014). Perversely, Le Doeuff notes, it is because Wollstonecraft embraced Rousseauian arguments on education and applied them to women that she was accused of imposing masculine values on women (Le Doeuff 2003,

<sup>5</sup> Le Doeuff 2003, 45–46. Le Doeuff suggested, in conversation in 2014, that she was on the brink of beginning a more systematic investigation of the matter.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Suchon explicitly denounces plagiarism—the practice of authors "borrowing" ideas from the ancients "without revealing they take so many fine ideas" (Stanton and Wilkin 2010, 16).

44). In other words, a philosophical theory that started with a woman was hijacked by a man, was identified with him, and was then deemed unsuitable when another woman attempted to appropriate it. This may seem, in this context, a poor example, as Rousseau's *Émile* is very rarely taught in courses on the history of philosophy. Nonetheless, Rousseau is taught, at least in courses on the history of social and political philosophy, a great deal more often than either Suchon or Wollstonecraft. And in a sense, these two are excluded because he is not: one can only teach so many texts about political virtues, republicanism, or education.

### 3. The Women-Only Course Option

As I argued earlier on, women philosophers of the past were not as isolated as they seem to think they were. It is not hard to create a narrative of continuity between Héloïse and Wollstonecraft, through Christine de Pizan and Suchon. All four are concerned with defending women against slanders on their capacity for virtue and intellect. All four struggle to some extent with understanding what the place of women might be in the city, from Héloïse, who models political life to some extent on her convent, to Wollstonecraft, who begs the French revolutionaries to grant women roles equal to men's in their republic. All are also concerned with educating women, believing that virtue can only flourish when reason is strong, and that the ability to think abstractly is necessary for moral development. Thus, it would make perfect sense to propose a course to undergraduate students that focused on texts by these four women and developed the themes of political empowerment, education, and moral development. This would provide plenty of material for a one-semester course, on a par with, say, a course on the rationalists focusing on Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. This course could be offered as an alternative to one on the rationalists or the empiricists.

Although attractive no doubt to many scholars who specialize in the area of the history of women philosophers, this option has some rather obvious drawbacks, both from the perspective of the project of feminizing the discipline and from the point of view of logistics. Many departments still feel they have to offer a complete set of rationalist and empiricist courses, spanning two semesters.<sup>7</sup> Students may feel cheated if they do not study at least Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, especially if these authors are replaced by less well-known ones. The field of philosophy is sufficiently conservative that any attempt at replacing a male author by a female one risks attracting calls of political correctness and being rejected accordingly; replacing a course full of men with a course full of women may strike many instructors as simply not feasible.

<sup>7</sup> This is anecdotal, as there are no central databases of early modern university-level courses. A quick search on the Internet does, however, show that there are still a significant number of philosophy departments that teach rationalist and empiricist courses.

Also, it is not clear that the creation of a course on women philosophers would do much for the attempt at feminizing the discipline. Students have a tendency to pick on women's singularity and see them first as women, second as philosophers.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps like Warnock, they see discussions of equality as not sufficiently universal to fit in a general history of philosophy course. In that case, surely, the answer is to mix up men and women philosophers more, not separate them further, and a course focusing only on female philosophers will risk encouraging this tendency to segregate. Similarly, if a department were to offer a course on women philosophers that did not replace another history of philosophy course, it would have to be offered as an elective. The effect of this would be to send the message, loud and clear, that women philosophers are not central to the discipline, that even if we introduce them into the curriculum, they are not an essential part of it. The time might come when a course focusing on a set of texts by women might be an attractive option, but that will be a time when women are already integrated into the mainstream curriculum. In the meantime, we need to find a different solution.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. The Dialogues Option

In the introduction to *An Unconventional History of Western Philosophy: Conversations Between Men and Women Philosophers*, Karen Warren describes the objective of the book as providing "a gender-inclusive account of the history of Western philosophy that avoids the so-called 'add-women-and-stir' problem in a way that does not require abandoning the canonical accounts of that history" (Warren 2009, 2). She achieves this by including an excerpt from each of the central figures of ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary philosophy as well as an excerpt from a female philosopher writing in the same period and engaging with the same problems. So Perictione and Theano are together with Aristotle, Hildegard of Bingen with Augustine, Héloïse with Abelard, Elisabeth with Descartes, Macaulay with Hobbes, Masham with Locke, Conway with Leibniz, Wollstonecraft with Rousseau, van Shurman with Kant, Taylor with Mill, Arendt with Heidegger, Addams with Dewey, Anscombe with

<sup>8</sup> In Berges 2013, I report the following anecdote. When asked whether they had enjoyed reading Christine de Pizan as part of the history of social and political philosophy course, students replied that they had, but that perhaps she would have fitted better in a course on women philosophers, together with Wollstonecraft, whom they read in the second semester of that same course.

<sup>9</sup> For the same reason, volumes that gather extracts from women philosophers, such as Atherton 1996, risk putting across the message that women philosophers can be collected together in one volume and do not deserve individual attention. On the other hand, volumes such as Atherton's solve another problem: it is much less costly to buy Atherton's book than to buy individual texts for Conway, Cavendish, and Masham, and so it means that in principle all three can be covered in one course alongside their male contemporaries.

Wittgenstein, and de Beauvoir with Sartre. Each chapter is introduced by a scholar who is an expert on the relevant philosophers.

Warren points out that her book is unique, and that with its publication there is no longer any excuse for teaching the history of philosophy without women. But the texts she selects are very short and the commentaries too simple to serve any courses other than introductory ones. It is hard to see how the book could be used to teach a course in early modern philosophy. Unfortunately, Warren is right in saying that her book is unique. There are no editions of Leibniz that include texts by Conway or editions of Descartes that include Elisabeth's letters—all the more surprising, as his *Meditations* are often published together with the objections and replies.<sup>10</sup> And although there is a relatively inexpensive edition of the *Correspondence* as part of the Other Voice series, it is often hard to justify the purchase of another text, which is neither central nor straightforwardly a commentary (Shapiro 2007). In a course on Descartes or on the history of the mind-body problem the addition of the *Correspondence* would be justified, but perhaps not so easily in an introductory-level course on early modern philosophy. In that case one has to resort to photocopies or to Jonathan Bennett's excellent site, EarlyModernTexts.com, which contains modern translations of the correspondence between Descartes and Elisabeth.<sup>11</sup>

Another possibility is to include a reader of early modern women writers to be used alongside the traditional male early modern philosophers read in rationalist and empiricist courses. Margaret Atherton's volume *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* seems the obvious choice, as its selections include Elisabeth but also Conway, Cavendish, and Masham. It is not an expensive volume, and students who have to purchase texts by individual male philosophers will hardly object to one book containing texts by seven female philosophers. On the other hand, the risk, again, is that women philosophers will be perceived as somehow less important, and less deserving of their own editions, than their male counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

## 5. Back to a Chronological or Thematic History of Philosophy

It seems as if a principal obstacle to the inclusion of texts by women in courses on early modern philosophy is the pre-imposed structure that

<sup>10</sup> The correspondence with Elisabeth is not included, for instance, in the Cottingham 1996 edition of *Descartes's Meditations* for the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy series. On the other hand, Clarke 1998, which contains the *Meditations* as well as excerpts from other texts, does have some of the correspondence.

<sup>11</sup> The site is now run by Peter Millican.

<sup>12</sup> Another disadvantage of using a collection rather than editions of individual texts is that publishing houses are less likely to accept proposals for new editions of texts by early modern women if they are not going to be used in teaching. See Lascano 2014.

divides such courses into the rationalists and the empiricists. As we saw, the idea that we have to stick to this model because there was a dialogue going on between these men is mostly artificial. The real dialogues were going on between people who were close together, either geographically or historically—these included women. And when it came to commenting on and reacting to works by others, it is at least conceivable, as in the plausible (but as yet unverified) account Le Doeuff gives about Rousseau and Suchon, that women did have some influence and that this influence was kept quiet. To the extent that male philosophers had exchanges with other philosophers more than women did, it is because they had better access to each other's thoughts: they published, they met, gave public lectures, and so on. Women didn't.

According to Jonathan Rée, until the mid-eighteenth century, the canon was simply an inclusive list of whatever philosophers had written (Rée 2002, 647). This did not mean that women were fully represented: there was always less chance both of women who philosophized to be published and become known and of men to deem them sufficiently important to record their existence. So Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives of the Philosophers*, for instance, records the bare facts of the lives of a handful of women, but he clearly does not have access to their writings and does not feel he has to spend as much time talking about them as he does talking about men. But in any case it was not unheard of for women to be included in works on the history of philosophy, even, in the case of Gilles Ménage's 1690 book, *The History of Women Philosophers*, to constitute the subject matter of a single work.<sup>13</sup> But, Rée tells us, history of philosophy stopped being a hold-all record of philosophical works when Kant decided that it needed to be schematized, that the point of history was "watching, or rather provoking, a conflict of assertions" and trying to "discover the point of misunderstanding" they arise from (Rée 2002, 650). This has resulted in a canon that has become a "systematic encyclopedia of philosophical doctrines" (650). It is not clear that it is fair to blame Kant for the schematization of the history of the discipline, because others before him attempted to classify it and because the classification we ended up with, emphasising epistemology, is not strictly speaking Kantian.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, because we have adopted certain Kant-inspired views as the structuring mantra for teaching early modern philosophy, we do end up focusing only on a history of metaphysics and epistemology, ignoring the work that was done on ethics and politics.<sup>15</sup> What we teach under the heading of early modern is a

<sup>13</sup> On Ménage's *History* see Rée 2002, 9, and Lopez McAlister 1989, 2.

<sup>14</sup> See Vanzo 2013 on how a careful study of how the history of philosophy evolved clears up certain misconceptions on the role of Kant in the creation of our current schemas.

<sup>15</sup> Kant himself did not have such a narrow focus, counting Montaigne, Mandeville, and Hutcheson as ethical empiricists (Vanzo 2013, 61).

selection of Kant's male metaphysical predecessors, carefully chosen to make his own theoretical edifice intelligible.<sup>16</sup>

One of the obvious disadvantages of being bound by a Kantian or post-Kantian schematization of history, aside from the fact that it excludes women philosophers, is that it does not take into account questions that range outside the traditional epistemological and metaphysical ones. We spend a lot of time and energy, as students, trying to understand outdated metaphysical systems, which very few people take seriously, as opposed to ethical, social, and political arguments that are still influential today. This is not necessarily reflected in contemporary publications, in the sense that those who publish in ethics and politics are more likely to cite authors who published on the same topic recently than they are to go back several centuries for their sources. Some writers constitute an exception: Michael Slote's works are very nearly always based on his reading of several historical sources, ancient or modern. Martha Nussbaum similarly grounds her arguments in those of past writers, whether Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, or Adam Smith. Some areas of ethics and political philosophies lend themselves better to the choice of a historical background, such as virtue ethics and republicanism.<sup>17</sup>

It seems, therefore, as though the surest way to feminize the teaching of the history of philosophy is to let go of our pseudo-Kantian structure and to create courses around a greater variety of themes and not feel the same sort of restrictions when it comes to choosing texts. A text on early modern metaphysics might include Descartes but also Cavendish. A course on logic will have Conway as well as Leibniz. A course on social and political philosophy will have Hobbes and Suchon, Rousseau and Wollstonecraft; on philosophy of science Bacon, Hobbes, and Cavendish; on human nature Locke and Astell; and so on.<sup>18</sup>

Although this method requires that those who initially design courses and prepare textbooks or editions should know something of the context, the approach to teaching itself does not presuppose either a "contextualist" or an "appropriationist" approach to the history of philosophy (Laerke, Smith, and Schliesser 2013, 1). Possibly, if one regards

<sup>16</sup> Again, this is not strictly accurate, as Kant did not count Descartes as a rationalist or Berkeley as an empiricist (Vanzo 2013, 62).

<sup>17</sup> Republican thought in the eighteenth century, in particular, is an important source for contemporary philosophical debates in neo-republicanism (Honohan 2002) and raises questions about how the ideals of antique republicanism and its classical revival could be applied to large, commercial societies (Pocock 1975; Pettit 2006) and, in particular, about how the problem of participation might be addressed (Matthes 2001; Skinner 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Of course, existing courses in the history of political thought cannot be used as a substitute: they too have their own canon, starting with Thucydides and finishing with Marx, through Machiavelli, and any attempt at inserting women into these will be met by resistance from those who would rather stick to the canonical males. Note that the dialogue approach advocated by Karen Warren will be of great help in designing such syllabi, as will the research that goes into designing women-only history of philosophy courses.



undergraduate teaching of the history of philosophy mostly as a way of helping students to practice dealing with ideas and arguments, and giving them a portfolio of “historical” arguments that they may use in debates over contemporary issues—such as “Cartesian dualism” in the philosophy of mind—then it makes sense not to be too imaginative with one’s choice of texts. Training people to use stock phrases derived from history courses as shortcuts for certain philosophical attitudes requires that everyone should have a superficial knowledge of the same authors and texts. This, however, is hardly the desired effect of even the most appropriationist teachers of the history of philosophy. At the very least, one wants students to reflect on the ideas presented, and develop their own arguments with regard to these ideas, rather than simply learn that Cartesianism is bad and Humeanism good, or vice versa. One might even regard the propensity of professional philosophers who work outside the history of philosophy to bandy about historical names and ideas as an undesired side-effect of having received poor training in the history of the discipline. One advantage of teaching history without too much emphasis on the context, it strikes me, is that it allows students more freedom in the exercise of their philosophical faculties. If the detail of an argument is missing, and students have to reconstruct the argument themselves, using ideas that make sense to them—rather than ideas that would have made sense to the author—there are bound to be more possible interpretations of a particular argument; perhaps not as many interpretations as there are students, but certainly more than the very small number of canonical interpretations presented to us by non-historians quoting historical figures. My experience is that a non-historically informed student reading Descartes’s *Meditations* does not see Cartesian dualism as it is taught in philosophy of mind courses but instead perceives various—more coherent or less coherent—other possibilities. Our job as teachers may be to help them pick out the more coherent, but perhaps not to direct them towards a single possibility. And it is clear that even if no teacher makes it his or her aim to propagate clichés to undergraduate students, the current model for teaching early modern philosophy encourages this. The lack of variety and the repetitive nature of the material typically taught in early modern courses makes for an excellent breeding ground for such clichés.

Is what is needed simply a reform in the course titles? Do departments that offer traditional history of philosophy courses, beginning with ancient and finishing with either nineteenth-century, continental, or analytic philosophy, need to replace the rationalist and empiricist courses with early modern 1 and early modern 2, perhaps even theoretical early modern and practical early modern (to impose another distinction in the teaching of philosophy that is not without its own disadvantages). This may seem too easy to be true—but a good start, I think, on the road to bringing back stranded female (and male) philosophers to the canon.

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