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Essay Review:

Between Exclusion and Seclusion: The Precarious and Elusive Place of Women in Early-Modern Thought

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Among intellectual historians, the seventeenth century is often thought of as the age of the scientific revolution and mechanical philosophy. In recent years, in the wake of social historical and feminist research, both the scientific revolution and the mechanical philosophy have been implicated in crucial gender redefinitions. By adding gender to race and class, this line of inquiry has informed a process of renewal and enrichment in the humanities and historical disciplines. Nevertheless, not everything in this revolution has been for the best. At the risk of seeming retrograde, I suggest that two historiographic myths, based on fanciful extrapolations from and narrow engagement with classic texts, need to be debunked: first, the myth of a holistic, "organismic," and peaceful premodernity; and second, the myth of a scientific objectivity that is supposed to be derived from an alleged masculinization of thought. These two myths presuppose a shift of epistemic proportion from an organic premodernity to an objectified modernity, driven by the impulse to control and dominate. The main culprits, of course, are Francis Ba-

con, charged with the rape of nature, and René Descartes, diagnosed with an “anxiety over separation from the organic female universe.”¹

With regard to the first myth, Carolyn Merchant's *Death of Nature*, published in 1980, successfully popularized the view that both the new science and the underlying mechanical philosophy demonstrated an aggressive, exploitative, and male chauvinistic attitude in their attempts to subjugate nature and, by extension, woman. Purportedly, a parallel subjugation took place between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Francis Bacon was its outspoken advocate: “The new image of nature as a female to be controlled and dissected through experiment legitimated,” said Merchant, “the exploitation of natural resources.”² Merchant's interpretation relied on the catchy but incorrect narrative of a benign and tolerant “order of nature in the cosmos, society, and the self”³ that was destroyed by an evil mechanical philosophy, harbinger of dualistic conflict, atomistic dissection, and oppressive organization. This interpretation is more than a little nostalgic. It also picks and chooses the past it wishes to romanticize, for we could, if we wished, read the subjugation of nature and woman into the “organic” view of classical and premodern authors whereby form and the whole (the masculine) took precedence over matter and the parts (the feminine). An organic view need not be pleasing either: the utopianism that Merchant associates with the “organismic” project—Campanella's *Città del sole*, for example—might well worry those attached to a society of a less organized, more open order.

1. Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 5.

2. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 189–190. As for Bacon's misogynistic iconography, Sarah Hutton has appropriately emphasized the need to place his allegorical imagery within the context of the complex mythographical traditions of the Renaissance in order to avoid seeing gendered images of dominations where they do not exist: “From the perspective of the late Renaissance, the significance of Bacon's metaphors appears very different from the interpretations that seem obvious to postmodern readers. One consequence of this is that it is not so easy to conclude that Baconian science is by definition misogynistic” (Sarah Hutton, “The Riddle of the Sphinx: Francis Bacon and the Emblems of Science,” in *Women, Science and Medicine, 1500–1700: Mothers and Sisters of the Royal Society*, ed. Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton [Stroud: Sutton, 1997], p. 10).

3. Merchant, *Death of Nature*, p. 127. The same idealizing of the “organic” periods of history can be found in Bordo's *Flight to Objectivity* (above, n. 1; see pp. 7, 101: “the organic, finite, maternal universe of the Middle Ages and Renaissance”). The “bucolic” view of the premodern era can also be found in Brian Easlea, *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy: An Introduction to Debates of the Scientific Revolution, 1450–1750* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), esp. pp. 241–252.

The second myth is represented by a cluster of ideas nicely packaged but, again, constructed on a narrow foundation that truncates our understanding of the early-modern historical process. The rise of scientific method has been linked to the notion of objectivity. Objectivity, in this reading, is made to consist in the denial of the feminine—a masculine response of detachment and alienation from the female universe and everything it represents. Drawing heavily on psychoanalysis, scholars such as Erica Harth and Susan Bordo have taken “objectivity” to stand for impersonality, detachment, and anonymity. Science, in this way, has been viewed as a masculine mode of discourse, of which Descartes’s *cogito* is the apogee. It seems to be quite immaterial that Descartes, for the first time in Western thought, clearly announced that men and women share the faculty of reason equally. For Harth, the Cartesian legacy, far from broadening participation in intellectual culture, “contributed heavily to a totalizing rational discourse of abstract universality and objectivity from which women by the historical contingencies of their gender became excluded.”⁴ The point is that belief in the masculinity of scientific thought is precisely a prejudice. Of course, we could say that Cartesianism provided arguments for epistemologically, politically, and socially totalitarian views, but if we are to argue in this fashion, then we could just as well say that Paracelsus—the supposed advocate of mother earth—should be numbered among the inspirers of Nazism.

The social, political, and legal importance of gender in early modernity is beyond doubt, but inquiries into the role that it played have labored under the ideological commitments of many of the field’s pioneers. These commitments have simplified a complex history. It is all too easy to suppose a Manichean battlefield, on which femininity and masculinity confront each other through a series of hackneyed dichotomies: the concreteness and corporeality of the feminine world versus the abstractedness and intellectualism of the masculine world, feeling versus reason, collaboration versus antagonism, holism versus atomism, empathy versus objectification, and so forth. The great irony, of course—and it has been noted before—is that such revisionist historiography often reinscribes the very norms that it would destabilize. Shown the door, the much despised “eternal feminine” reenters through the window.

4. Erica Harth, *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 6. See also idem, *Ideology and Culture in Seventeenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983). The interpretation of Bacon and Descartes as mainly responsible for the masculinization of thought can already be found in Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

More recently, and more convincingly, Londa Schiebinger has argued that the gender-based distortions recognizable in the intellectual developments of the seventeenth century are to be ascribed to the way in which institutions were formed and the division of labor organized, and not to tectonic shifts in the substratum of ideas.⁵ The rigid division of intellectual labor determined the banishment of women from the republic of letters. Examining the place of women in the history of culture means first of all outlining a story of exclusions. “Why have there been no great women artists?” wondered historian of art Linda Nochlin in 1971, in a well-known article of the same title.⁶ The same question could also be asked with regard to women poets, women philosophers, and women historians. In a classic essay, Virginia Woolf wrote—bluntly but insightfully—that the marginality of women’s intellectual endeavors was the result of their lack of time, money, and idleness. More specifically, she pointed to the absence of a tradition, to the want of an interested audience and readership, to the lack of a critical response (any genuine response would be better than sneer or indifference), and the lack of access to varied life experience.⁷

The present volume, edited by Pina Totaro, now tries to answer the same question for the seventeenth century. The volume is a collection of twenty-one essays by scholars coming from different backgrounds, ranging from the history of philosophy to the history of art, from the ideal worlds of the mind to the material worlds of libraries and printing houses, and rightly so—for the above-mentioned exclusion concerns not only the direct and authorial production of knowledge, but also the institutional sites where learning is preserved, such as observatories, laboratories, printeries, museums, libraries, and cabinets. It is to a queen, Christina of Sweden, that we must turn in order to encounter an early-modern woman who directly and actively promoted the management of cultural assets and patronized the development of science and literature. As Maria Conforti

5. Londa Schiebinger, *Has Feminism Changed Science?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). In her analysis of Descartes, too, Schiebinger seems more reasonable. She acknowledges that Descartes contributed to the overcoming of entrenched notions of femininity and masculinity, but adds that this gain was offset by the Cartesian distinction between mind and body, a distinction that fostered the gendered division of public and private, and of intellectual and emotional labor. See Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 170–175.

6. Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *Art News* 69 (1971): 23–39, n. 9.

7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929; London: Penguin Books, 1993).

argues in her essay (pp. 265–285), Christina—both *femme savante* and cultural organizer—represented a remarkable case: she was the exception that confirms the rule. Less grandiose, but significant nonetheless, is the case of Francesca Giunti—daughter of the printer Tommaso Giunti and herself a printer—presented by Michaela Valente (pp. 339–345). Valente focuses on the difficulties faced by Giunti in order to publish and continue to sell the Italian translation of Jean Bodin’s *Démonomanie des sorciers*, a risky enterprise, both intellectually and economically. Valente’s essay sheds light on early-modern women viewed not only as prominent actors *in* narratives of diabolic obsession, but also as readers and publishers *of* demonological literature. What is more, Francesca Giunti is yet another example of forgotten female activity in the republic of letters, in this case the activity of a woman entrepreneur. It is an instance of what Schiebinger has called the “workaday world of the artisanal workshop,” where “women as well as men were active in family business.”⁸

Referring specifically to the history of philosophy, Sarah Hutton hints at the factors that “make the process of recovering the women philosophers of the past more akin to archaeology” (p. 110). To recover from the past the philosophical, scientific, literary, and artistic contributions of women is still an arduous task, not only because of difficulties that we could define as “ideological”—that is, the screen of stereotypes and commonplaces to which male writers have often appealed⁹—but also, and above all, because of an intrinsic difficulty: what we know about women and what we possess of their work is mainly an absence, sometimes a reflection of men’s ideas, often the shadow of women’s thoughts projected onto men’s collections of letters, at most footnotes to the so-called great works of the mind. As has been pointed out by Schiebinger, the tenuous and fractured history of women in science and philosophy—a history characterized by “cycles of advancement and retrenchment”—is, to a large extent, still about unrecorded lives, forgotten stories, and lost traditions.¹⁰

The collection provides the historian with a varied array of reasons to explain women’s marginal role in early-modern culture. First, the paucity of texts and documents due to the dispersal of archives represents the main gap to be filled. Second, women’s authorship tends to be self-effacing (unbecoming as it was for early-

8. Schiebinger, *Mind Has No Sex?* (above, n. 5), p. 65.

9. On this point, see the essay by Monica Fintoni, “L’ingegno negato: L’immaginario antifemminile tra il XVI e XVII secolo,” pp. 87–108.

10. Schiebinger: *Mind Has No Sex?* (above, n. 5), p. 2; *Has Feminism Changed Science?* (above, n. 5), p. 32.

modern women to publish other than poems, books of domestic economy, or manuals of good manners): Damaris Cudworth's philosophical treatises, *The Discourse on Love of God* and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705), were both published anonymously and taken for John Locke's works when they appeared. Third, women's role in cultural life, if any, has always been an instrumental and subordinate one, rigidly organized around a sexual division of intellectual labor. Women were usually assigned works of translation and philological studies, encouraged to write escapist literature and romantic novels, and invited to converse and decorate (and not just in the strict sense that women more often than not devoted themselves to miniature and flower painting): Anne Le Fevre, Madame Dacier (who in the eighteenth century translated ancient Greek texts), Maria Leti (who translated into French the work of her father, Gregorio Leti, *La vie de l'empereur Charles V*, published in 1702), and Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola (who translated Descartes's *Principia* into Italian, 1722) are some of the cases analyzed in this volume. Fourth, we can go back to women's intellectual activities through indirect sources (e.g., the recipients of dedications, or the correspondents of letters) and extrinsic and accidental links (e.g., wife-husband relationship, daughter-father relationship, disciple-master relationship). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women painters, for example, are remembered only for their connections to men artists, as Gaia Salvatori shows in her essay on the early-modern figure of the female painter (pp. 393–420). Likewise, the most renowned seventeenth-century women philosophers owe their fame to the relationships they maintained with famous men philosophers: suffice it to think of Princess Elizabeth and René Descartes, Anne Conway and Henry More, Damaris Cudworth and John Locke. A brilliant woman of culture, Sophie von der Pfalz, although she cannot be considered to have been as engaged with metaphysics as Elizabeth, still has a place in the republic of letters because of her correspondence and conversations with Leibniz (see Margherita Palumbo's essay, pp. 297–325). The case of Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, may be considered an exception, but she paid for her ostentatious independence with the charge of being an eccentric maverick not to be taken seriously from an intellectual point of view.

We have mentioned one major "external" difficulty in outlining the shadowy intellectual history of early-modern women: that is, the screen of misogynous rhetoric. The depressing thing is that often it is not only a matter of primary sources, but also of secondary literature, as is well witnessed by the condescending attitude of many renowned scholars who in the past used subtly to dismiss women's

contributions to intellectual life as the work of inspiring muses, garrulous holders of salons, accidental scholars, helpful translators, invisible assistants, obedient daughters, and worshipping wives. Charles Adam, for instance, relegated Princess Elizabeth to the passive role of an inspirer.¹¹ Likewise, Giovanni Gentile considered Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola as a dilettante who made a pastime of philosophy.¹² An analogous process of depreciation took place in the historiography of art: a slighting critical opinion hung for centuries over seventeenth-century women painters like Judith Leyster, Anna Maria van Schurman, Lavinia Fontana, Elisabetta Sirani, and Artemisia Gentileschi, which sometimes rendered the attribution of some paintings extremely difficult (see Gentileschi's *Susanna e i vecchi*). All these cases can be seen as characteristic examples of what François Poulain de la Barre—the seventeenth-century Cartesian feminist—called prejudices of “learned men.”¹³

Sarah Hutton has nicely summarized the dilemma of women who engaged in pursuits not conventionally regarded as female: “whether to go public and risk ridicule . . . or to pursue [their] interest privately and risk dropping altogether from view.”¹⁴ When survival is hard, it goes without saying that one has to live by one's wits, finding niches and interstices, refining one's own intellectual gifts through irony and dissimulation, expressing dissent and subversion through euphemization. Court, salon, and convent, different as they were, demanded particular skills in those women who wanted to play some cultural role. In their presentation of the self, women had to resort to sophisticated procedures of self-censorship and self-restraint in order for their intellectual attempts not to be dismissed as arrogant or ridiculous. Since it was considered unbecoming for a woman to show herself as learned, self-effacement became the most common strategy through the adoption of forms of studied spontaneity and propriety. In this connection, feminine modesty and simulation of ignorance added some complexity and delicacy to the old Socratic tactic. In Martina De Luca's interpretation (pp. 387–392), women

11. Charles Adam, *Descartes et ses amitiés féminines* (Paris: Boivin, 1937).

12. Giovanni Gentile, *Studi vichiani* (Florence: Sansoni, 1968), p. 5. See the essay by Manuela Sanna, “Un'amicizia alla luce del cartesianismo: Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola e Luisa Vico,” pp. 173–178.

13. François Poulain de la Barre, *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (Paris, 1673), preface, quoted by Siep Stuurman, “Social Cartesianism: François Poulain de la Barre and the Origins of the Enlightenment,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 620.

14. Sarah Hutton, “Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and Seventeenth-Century Scientific Thought,” in Hunter and Hutton, *Women, Science and Medicine* (above, n. 2), p. 232.

painters often chose to paint a self-portrait as a reflected image in a mirror, thus adopting an unobtrusively self-promoting device and showing, at the same time, great mastery of the brush. In his paper on books and libraries in the convents after the Counter-Reformation, Danilo Zardin shows the subtle strategies followed by nuns to preserve a minimum of intellectual freedom in such an oppressive environment as the convent (pp. 347–381). As the cases of Arcangela Tarabotti, Jeanne Guyon, and Anna Maria van Schurman show, women's intellectual emancipation often started in religious contexts. Unfortunately, this kind of emancipation could not help being ambiguous: the quest for learning, which was advocated as a means of spiritual elevation, was simultaneously felt to be a source of pride and vanity. Seclusion could mean more than one thing: a necessity or a choice.

Like the female mind, the female body has been the site of ideological constructions. Indeed, as the history of the medical disciplines tellingly shows, women's biological identity has always been the result of successive layers of cultural assumptions. The specific tradition of medical environmentalism inaugurated by the Hippocratic Corpus and based on cosmological (hot and cold), biological (humors, radical humidity and innate heat), and astrological factors (heavenly influences and seasonal changes) represented a rather rigid system of reference in which everything, including men's and women's nature, could find its place and definition. Very few alternatives were allowed by this conventional view. Given the Galenic emphasis on precise correspondences between humors, passions, and moral habits, woman's psyche, too, was framed by the same biological determinism that had made her a cold, phlegmatic, passive, and sluggish being. Antonella Pagano, in her contribution to the volume, outlines the history of voluntary abstinence up to the first vague descriptions of anorexia nervosa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and she highlights the shift from a humoralistic to a neurophysiological scheme (pp. 117–140). The shift, however, did not prevent physicians and physiologists from continuing to regard the bodily complexion as still relevant for the definition of a woman's nature. Albrecht von Haller's influential doctrine of irritability and sensibility, to give a telling example, provided physicians and physiologists with a reformed doctrine of temperaments up to the nineteenth century: instead of being colder, more catarrhal, and more viscous than men, women became more irritable and sensible; although updated, the ideological distortion remained.

"Women are but men turn'd outside in," it is said in *Aristotle's Masterpiece* (first published in 1684), a popular handbook on sex used

in the eighteenth century.¹⁵ If not an imperfect version of man—a “deformed male” and a “mutilated male,” in Aristotle’s terms,¹⁶ or *mas occasionatus*, in the scholastic terminology—woman displays, less reassuringly, a nature other than that of man. The Aristotelian version, if carried to the extreme, could even endorse the view that women as other animals are devoid of rational soul. The treatise *La vera narrazione delle operationi delle donne*, published in 1586 under the pseudonym of Onofrio Filarco; Giuseppe Passi’s *Dei donneschi difetti* (1595); and *Disputatio nova contra mulieres* (1595), by Valens Havekenthal (Acidalius), sparked off a debate over the nature of the female soul.¹⁷ Significantly, as Totaro hints in her introduction to the volume, both Lucrezia Marinelli (in *La nobiltà e l’eccellenza delle donne*, 1601) and Arcangela Tarabotti (in *Che le donne siano della spetie degli Huomini*, 1651) tried to rebut the misogynic offensive by using medical findings (Hippocrates and Galen) rather than philosophical arguments (Aristotle). Helen King, in her recently published *Hippocrates’ Woman*, has shown how the Hippocratic gynecological treatises helped develop the terms of the female difference better than the Aristotelian tradition.¹⁸

Whereas the traditional philosophies—Aristotelianism and Platonism—either made of women irrational creatures or raised them to the rarefied heights of disembodied spirits and angels, the new philosophies of the seventeenth century could offer fresh resources for psychological and anthropological researches. Although contemporary fashionable philosophical tendencies, as we saw above, still see in Descartes and Cartesianism the quintessential expression of the dominant white male subjectivity—the “defiant gesture of independence from the female cosmos,” to use Susan Bordo’s words¹⁹—both historically and theoretically Descartes’s notion of the mind widely contributed to the demolition of prejudices about gender inequality.²⁰

15. Aristotle’s *Masterpiece, or, the Secrets of Generation Displayed in All the Parts Thereof* (London: printed for W. B., 1694).

16. Aristotle, *De generatione animalium*, 728a17, 737a.

17. See Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 12–13.

18. Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998).

19. Bordo, *Flight to Objectivity* (above, n. 1), p. 106.

20. On the role of Cartesian philosophy in debunking old notions of femininity and masculinity, see Paul Hoffmann, *La femme dans la pensée des lumières* (Paris: Ophrys, 1977), pp. 45–52; Ruth Perry, “Radical Doubt and the Liberation of Women,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18 (1985): 472–493; Schiebinger, *Mind Has No Sex?* (above, n. 5), pp. 170–175.

Unfortunately, Francesca Brezzi's essay on Jeanne Guyon (pp. 61–78) suffers from precisely the above-mentioned fashionable weakness: It is hard to understand the meaning of expressions like "the man's discourse" (p. 66) and "the monopoly of the intelligible reserved to man" (p. 68) when referred to Descartes's thought, a thought that, in Brezzi's opinion, is to be "deconstructed" so as to rediscover the specific and spontaneous female ego, body, and language. It is hard to understand statements like these when—as many examples throughout the volume illustrate very well (and, from this point of view, Brezzi's essay seems to stand apart from many of the other essays)—the number of French Cartesian women was larger than that of any other philosophical sect,²¹ when Poulain de la Barre could claim that "l'esprit n'a point de sexe,"²² but above all when Cartesian philosophy from the very outset ruled out any sexual hierarchy within the universality of the *ego cogito*. Fortunately, Geneviève Rodis-Lewis's essay (pp. 155–170) restores the interpretative balance. Being a genuine expert in Descartes's work, she moves with agility in the Cartesian corpus and provides plenty of evidence for Descartes's belief that "the equality of sense [*bon sens*] or reason holds good for all men, without distinction of sex, and the spontaneity of a woman who practices it well is better than the artificial rules of the scholastic discussions" (p. 155).

Another fashionable platitude about Cartesianism is its alleged disparagement of feelings and the supposedly oppressive dualism of mind and body. Descartes's theory of the substantial union turned out to be a very productive idea from a medical and ethical point of view, even if metaphysically it was undoubtedly a puzzling position. In her essay, Antonella Pagano notes how the Cartesian view helped change the traditional medical assumptions concerning the relationship between emotional states and bodily phenomena. Since Fucher de Careil and Charles Adam's essays on Descartes and Princess Elizabeth, scholars of Cartesian thought have been attracted to the role of Elizabeth in the development of Descartes's metaphysical and moral views. Admittedly, we are still in the presence of an inspiring muse, but Elizabeth was also a muse well-versed in mathematics and metaphysics. Especially in recent years (and Rodis-Lewis's paper is a further confirmation), there have been articles and essays that have tried to lay bare Elizabeth's specific contribution to Cartesian metaphysics (substantial union of substances) and ethics

21. See also Linda Timmermans, *L'accès des femmes à la culture (1598–1715)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1993).

22. See Sturman, "Social Cartesianism" (above, n. 13), pp. 617–640.

(happiness and virtue) in terms of appropriate commentary and intellectual incentives. Through Elizabeth's requests, Descartes overcame his natural reserve and made public some opinions that he would never have openly expressed otherwise, such as his comments on Machiavelli's *Il principe*, Stoic philosophy, the passions of the soul, and happiness. All this is not insignificant, and indeed Rodis-Lewis defines this part of Descartes's work as "les plus belles pages du cartésianisme" (p. 168).

Whereas Elizabeth served mainly as a source of inspirations and objections, Anne Conway managed to pass from the critique of someone else's reason to the construction of her own philosophical system. But in this case, too, her work *Principia philosophiae antiquissimae et recentissimae* was handed down to us only through a series of accidental events. Sarah Hutton reminds us of the complex story underlying the publication of Conway's work (pp. 109–115): The original version, which has been lost, was a manuscript written in English. After Conway's death in 1679, it was translated into Latin and published anonymously in *Opuscula philosophica*, a collection of several texts that came out in 1690. Finally, in 1692 it was translated again into English and published with the title *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*. It is an authorship sui generis, as Hutton sums up: "we read a translation of a translation, published anonymously without the author's knowledge and possibly against her intentions, more than a decade after she died" (p. 111).

Conway's philosophy cannot be separated from her personal theological and medical concerns. She chose a form of spiritual monism as a solution to the question of substance. Returning for a moment to Elizabeth, it is interesting to note how often in the seventeenth century learned women turned to Stoicism to deal with moral, emotional, and medical problems. (Both Elizabeth and Conway objected to dualism, starting from their own experiences of physical pain and depression.) Can we say that there was an early-modern Stoicism *pour les dames*? When spaces and opportunities to the fulfillment of happiness are limited, Stoicism has always had a great allure. Although Descartes did not agree, Elizabeth tried to find a remedy for her recurrent bouts of depression by turning to Stoic philosophy. Maria Conforti reminds us that another of Descartes's famous female correspondents, Queen Christina of Sweden, was influenced by an education heavily marked by Stoic models. In her contribution, Luisa Simonutti shows how Damaris Cudworth saw in the thoroughly inner life of the mind—what she called the *Aetherial Plaine*—an antidote for melancholy and bad fate (pp. 179–195): to Locke she writes, "I have beene thinking therefore that the best improvement

I can make by my Misfortunes will be to take advantage of my Temper and turne a Stoick.”²³ Gabrielle Suchon, who in 1694 published—anononymously, of course—a *Traité de la liberté*, referred to the Stoic philosophy to extol the absolute freedom of the mind, and in *Du célibat volontaire, ou la vie sans engagement* (1700) she transformed the Stoic notion of freedom into a more concrete opportunity by taking celibacy as a powerful means of both spiritual and social emancipation. As Eva Cerquetelli argues (pp. 245–262), in Suchon’s analysis celibacy became “a rational and ideal option for women who did not feel a natural inclination toward marriage or religious life” (p. 249). This is a further instance of how important leisure and seclusion were to early-modern women who wanted to devote themselves to cultural activities.²⁴

As a whole, the collection of studies edited by Totaro is a good overview on current work on women in early modernity. The reader’s only quibble may be that the book has an uneven look. Case study is the dominant genre, and this fractures the reader’s perspective on the period. One might say that this is because the collection is intended to represent a polyphonic and pluralistic view, or that the unevenness of the collection can be taken as a reflection of the seventeenth-century landscape, made up of circumscribed areas of covert dissent, historical discontinuities, and esoteric lives. But, in the case of Descartes especially, where different essays propose conflicting views, the editorial license might have been stricter.

Acknowledgment

I am particularly grateful to David Marshall for revising the English of this essay review.

23. *The Correspondence of John Locke*, ed. E. S. De Beer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976–1989), vol. 2, p. 510.

24. See, for instance, Perry, “Radical Doubt” (above, n. 20), p. 479. Erica Harth has pointed out how the female characters in Madeleine de Scudéry’s novels rejected love and marriage in favor of friendship, a decision fraught with social and political consequences: “If the model for the monarchy is patriarchal marriage (as, reciprocally, the model for the family at the time was the state), women are doomed to marginality and unhappiness” (Harth, *Cartesian Women* [above, n. 4], p. 58).