

Editoriale

Not Simply «Impertinencies of a Womans Pen»

Emilio M. De Tommaso  0000-0003-1865-6924

Delfina Giovannozzi  0000-0002-2047-2684

This *Introduction* reflects on the intellectual contributions of women to Western intellectual history, spanning from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, and their strategies for overcoming systemic biases within a predominantly male-dominated culture. Beginning with Mary Astell's 1693 correspondence with John Norris, it highlights the significance of epistolary exchanges, paratexts, and private writings as venues for philosophical discourse and as tools to challenge traditional gender norms. These forms of expression allowed women to engage in intellectual debates and assert their agency in an era that often denied them public platforms. The text critiques the enduring exclusion of women from canonical intellectual narratives, tracing its origins to Aristotelian and Platonic traditions, and questions the framing of exceptional women as anomalies rather than representatives of broader intellectual potential. By integrating historical and philosophical analysis, the introduction underscores the necessity of reinterpreting intellectual history to recover marginalized voices, confront entrenched biases, and promote a more inclusive and equitable understanding of cultural and philosophical heritage.

1. «I sent the women away»

In a letter dated September 21, 1693, addressed to John Norris of Bemerton (1657-1711), the English thinker Mary Astell (1666-1731) begins with the following words:

Though some morose Gentlemen wou'd perhaps remit me to the Distaff or the Kitchin, or at least to the Glass and the Needle, the proper Employments as they fancy of a Womans Life; yet expecting better things from the more Equitable and Ingenious Mr. Norris, who is not so narrow-Soul'd as to confine Learning to his own Sex, or to

envy it in ours, I presume to beg his Attention a little to the *Impertinencies of a Womans Pen*¹.

The passage serves as a striking denunciation of the entrenched prejudice concerning women's purported intellectual inferiority. At the same time, it highlights the author's acute rhetorical strategy, as she confronts her interlocutor with this very bias, implicitly urging him to transcend it and resist the influence of such preconceptions.

The correspondence between Astell and Norris, later published in London in 1695 under the title *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, represents one of the most compelling illustrations of the importance of epistolary exchanges in the early modern period. These letters functioned as virtual forums for intellectual dialogue, where ideas were conceived, refined, and disseminated. Unrestricted by geographic boundaries, such spaces connected philosophers across Europe and offered women an opportunity to engage actively in intellectual debates and discussions.

This phenomenon extended beyond the early modern era. As this volume will show, epistolary exchanges were not the only avenues for women to express their ideas, but they often adopted strategies such as anonymity, drawing upon the fact that men similarly resorted to this expedient to exercise their freedom of thought. Furthermore, women's participation in disguise also involved the use of alternative channels of expression, including dialogues, poetry, and paratexts – such as dedicatory letters, introductions, or afterwords – which, although limited in scope, offered genuine public spaces for intellectual debate.

The persistence of gender prejudice in Western culture is frequently attributed to the Aristotelian tradition and its integration with Christian theology. However, traces of such prejudice can also be identified in one of the most iconic passages of Plato's *Phaedo*, which portrays the harrowing moment when Socrates fulfills his death sentence by drinking hemlock. Through *Phaedo*'s narrative voice, Plato infuses this scene with a poignant emotional intensity that deeply engages the reader:

[...] Most of us had been able to hold back our tears reasonably well up till then, but when we saw him drinking it and after he drank it, we could hold them back no longer; my own tears came in floods against my will. So I covered my face. I was weeping for myself, not for him – for my misfortune in being deprived of such a comrade. Even before me, Crito was unable to restrain his tears and got up. Apollodorus had not ceased from weeping before, and at this moment his noisy tears and anger made everybody present break down, except Socrates. «What is this», he said, «you strange fellows. *It is mainly for this reason that I sent the women away, to avoid such unseemliness*, for I am told one should die in good omened silence. So keep quiet and control yourselves». His words made us ashamed, and we checked our tears (Plato, *Phaedo*, 117 c5-e3)².

¹ M. Astell and J. Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, Burlington 2005, p. 69. Our emphasis.

² Plato, *Phaedo*, in Id., *Complete Works*, ed. by J. M. Cooper, associated editor D. S. Hutchinson, Indianapolis-Cambridge 1997, p. 99.

This passage juxtaposes the overwhelming grief of Socrates' companions with his composed behaviour and philosophical perspective on death. While, the narrator's admission of personal sorrow, «weeping for myself, not for him», highlights the human difficulty in accepting loss, Socrates' admonition – urging his friends to maintain «good-omened silence» – reflects his commitment to rationality and dignity, even in the face of mortality. This moment reinforces Socrates' role as a moral and philosophical guide, teaching his followers how to face death with courage and equanimity.

However, the passage also reveals a significant instance of gender prejudice in Socrates' reasoning for dismissing the women from the scene. By sending them away to «avoid such unseemliness», Socrates implicitly associates emotional expression, particularly weeping, with women, suggesting that their presence might disrupt the calm and rational atmosphere he desires for his death. Metaphorically, this passage can be seen as the exclusion act of women from the cultural scene, in the Western intellectual history.

As is well known, this exclusion was approved by Aristotle and later confirmed by the long Aristotelian tradition. Indeed, according to Aristotle the difference between men and women is a difference of kind. In his *Generation of Animals*, he argues that men and women are fundamentally unequal in their biological roles: he believes that the male provides the «form» and «soul» in reproduction, while the female contributes only the «matter» (*GA*, 738b 20-26)³. This view reflects his interpretation of reproduction as a process where the male is active and perfect, while the female is passive and deficient. He saw women as biologically incomplete or «imperfect men» (woman as a *mas occasionatus*).

In *Politics*, Aristotle argues as follows:

Clearly, then, excellence of character belongs to all of them; but the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. And this holds of all other excellences, as will be more clearly seen if we look at them in detail, for those who say generally that excellence consists in a good disposition of the soul, or in doing rightly, or the like, only deceive themselves. [...]

All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women, *Silence is a woman's glory*, but this is not equally the glory of man (*Pol.*, 1260a 19-31)⁴.

History has proven Aristotle wrong, as women, fortunately, have not always remained silent. However, until recently, many accounts of Western intellectual history have neglected a crucial dimension: the contributions of women. Their voices, though present, have been systematically excluded from the dominant narrative.

Undeniably, there has been a significant disparity between the opportunities for self-expression afforded to men and those available to women.

³ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, in Id., *Complete Works*, ed. by J. Barnes, Princeton 1991, vol.1, pp. 44-45.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, Id., *Complete Works*, vol. 2, p. 18.

Often overshadowed by the voices of men – especially prior to the feminist revolution of the 20th century – women’s contributions have seemed faint, almost imperceptible.

However, there are, throughout history, instances – admittedly rare – of women who managed to escape oblivion and assert themselves publicly as intellectuals, philosophers, or scientists. In such cases, exclusion was perpetrated in a subtler manner, not by denying these women’s intellectual abilities, but by emphasizing their exceptional nature. As extraordinary cases, these learned women were portrayed as unrepresentative of their gender, exhibiting traits typically ascribed to men. A striking example is found in the well-known comment by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who praised two of the most brilliant French intellectuals of the time, the philologist Anna Dacier (1647-1720) and the scientist Émilie Du Châtelet (1706-1749): «A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Mme. Dacier, or who conducts thorough disputations about mechanics, like the Marquise du Châtelet, *might as well also wear a beard; for that might perhaps better express the mien of depth for which they strive*»⁵.

For centuries, the cultured woman has been depicted as conforming to a masculine ideal, embodying traits of strength and wisdom. As such, she represents an exception that can, precisely because of its rarity, be acknowledged, tolerated, and even admired – albeit, as Kant specifies, with a «cold admiration», since «laborious learning or painful grubbing, even if a woman could get very far with them, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex»⁶. From this perspective, a cultured woman posed no threat to the traditional notion of femininity, precisely because she was portrayed as an exception. This representation reinforced the idea that women were naturally incapable of the level of abstraction required by philosophy and science, thus safeguarding these intellectual domains as exclusively male.

2. Re-reading history to make history

In recent decades, particularly over the past twenty years, significant progress has been made in addressing gender inequality in many parts of the world. Yet, the journey toward achieving true equality remains long and replete with challenges. The contemporary philosopher Judith Butler argues that «gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing»⁷. However, while deeply linked to individual actions, the construction of gender is not a solitary effort; it always occurs in relation to others. As Butler notes:

⁵ I. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. by P. Frierson and P. Guyer, Cambridge 2011, pp. 36-37. Emphasis ours.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷ J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, New York-London 2004, p. 1.

What I call my 'own' gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author⁸.

In other words, gender represents a conventional concept, a social construct that, while intersecting with biological sex, remains distinct from it. This interpretation aligns with the perspectives of international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Council of Europe. These organizations distinguish *sex* – referring to the biological and physiological characteristics of individuals, including chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy – from *gender*, defined as a socially constructed set of norms, roles, and behaviours.

The Council of Europe's *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence* (commonly known as the Istanbul Convention) defines gender as «the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men»⁹. Similarly, the WHO emphasizes that «as a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time»¹⁰.

As a relative concept inherently shaped by social, cultural, and geographical contexts, gender must not – and cannot – serve as a justification for systemic prejudice, as it has historically been employed. The objective is not to underscore differences but, rather, to recognize them while cultivating the foundations of an inclusive culture that welcomes all individuals, excluding no one.

In this endeavour, philosophy and history play a pivotal role. These disciplines must transcend abstract reflections on the concept of gender and instead engage actively in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of intellectual history. To clarify, the intention is not to distort history by creating a fabricated alternative narrative. It is indisputable – and must never be forgotten – that women have long been relegated to peripheral roles. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that they have consistently and persistently found ways to contribute to intellectual discourse. Contrary to Aristotle's assertion that women find fulfilment in silence, history reveals their continuous engagement in public and intellectual spheres.

Our task is to amplify those voices, at times barely perceptible. Re-examining and rewriting history through an inclusive lens represents not only a crucial step in dismantling entrenched biases but also a foundation for constructing a genuinely inclusive historical narrative for the future.

⁸ *Ibid.* Our italics.

⁹ Istanbul Convention: art. 3 (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/council-of-europe-convention-on-preventing-and-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence>).

¹⁰ https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1.

3. In this volume

This issue of *Lo Sguardo* comprises twelve articles – two in French, four in Italian, and six in English – that aim to highlight the intellectual contribution of several women thinkers, ranging from the medieval to early modern periods. These essays seek to underscore the various strategies and means by which these women participated in the cultural and intellectual discourses of their respective eras.

The volume is organized into three sections: *Correspondence*, which comprises contributions examining letters as one of the primary channels of intellectual expression for women; *Anonymity, Paratexts, and Translations*, which investigates alternative tools and strategies through which women articulated their voices; and *In Full View*, which explores the experiences of women who defied gender prejudice and patriarchal authority without employing specific strategies of concealment.

Section 1, *Correspondence*, begins with Matteo Sperandini's analysis of the 12th-century correspondence between Heloise and Abelard. In his first epistle, commonly known under the title *Historia calamitatum mearum*, Abelard asserts that all human suffering is part of a divine plan for a greater good, framing his epistle as a work of consolation for an anonymous friend. Sperandini's essay examines Heloise's fourth letter, where she rejects providence by denouncing divine injustice, recognizing unresolved desires, condemning selective punishment, and confessing that her endurance serves Abelard, not God, thus exposing theological and personal tensions.

The correspondence between Descartes and Elizabeth of Bohemia (1643-1649) is among the most studied in the history of philosophy. Salvatore Grandone presents an anthropotechnical reading of this epistolary, framing Elizabeth's critique of Cartesian dualism within an «ascetic» lens, understood as self-cultivation. For her, exploring mind-body interaction offers a way to overcome passions and melancholy, reinterpreting Cartesianism as a philosophy of exercise. According to Grandone, drawing from ancient therapeutic traditions and emphasizing individual experience, the Princess of Bohemia not only enriches Descartes' theory of passions but also reimagines philosophy as a practice of psychological and existential healing.

Maria Giulia Sestito examines Margaret Cavendish's *Philosophical Letters* and *Sociable Letters*, both published in 1664, as texts through which the author engages both the central philosophical debates of her time and the prevailing assumption of women's incapacity for rational thought. By critically addressing the works of Hobbes and Descartes, this analysis demonstrates Cavendish's active participation in contemporary intellectual discourse. Furthermore, the paper explores her critique of the condition of women, emphasizing how, according to her natural philosophy, nature itself legitimates her capacity to write and engage with her male counterparts.

In the early 18th century, Jean Le Clerc and Pierre Bayle's debate over Ralph Cudworth's concept of plastic natures indirectly initiated the correspondence between Damaris Masham and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1703-1705). Emilio Maria De Tommaso focuses on this epistolary exchange, in which Masham demonstrates her intellectual prowess by prompting Leibniz to provide a detailed defense of pre-established harmony while also advocating for her father's philosophy against Bayle's accusations of atheism. According to De Tommaso, this correspondence offers an example of the circulation of ideas within the *République des Lettres*, where epistolary dialogue served as a vital link between private and public intellectual spheres.

In section 2, *Anonymity, Paratexts, and Translations*, Martina Guzzetti explores the strategies employed by 17th- and 18th-century midwives to challenge prevailing notions of their ignorance and reclaim authority in midwifery and obstetrics. Focusing on the paratexts of five midwifery manuals, the essay examines linguistic tools used to assert agency, authorship, and credibility. Guzzetti shows that midwives abandoned anonymity, employed evidentiality, and used persuasive arguments to establish trustworthiness, positioning themselves as key contributors to the dissemination of medical and scientific knowledge in an era dominated by male practitioners.

Sofia Beatriz Calvente explores the notion of chain of being, frequently invoked by 17th- and 18th-century naturalists and philosophers to justify female subordination. She examines whether Catharine Trotter Cockburn's endorsement of this framework (1743-1747) implies gendered hierarchies. According to Calvente, while Locke's skepticism about species boundaries limits definitive claims, he attributes women's subordination to men's superior natural capacity. In contrast, Cockburn's realist interpretation of fixed species boundaries supports natural gender equality, arguing that shared nature warrants equal treatment. She attributes women's subjugation to prejudices, not inherent inferiority.

Chiara Maciocci analyses Caroline von Wolzogen's role in Weimar Classicism, focusing on her decision to publish the first part of *Agnes von Lilien* (1798) anonymously. This choice, which led to initial attributions to Goethe and Schiller, is investigated within the semi-public salon culture (*Kleinöffentlichkeit*) of the period. Maciocci argues that anonymity served as an «existence strategy» for women writers, offering a marginal yet insightful perspective. The study seeks to reassess von Wolzogen's biographical and editorial trajectory during a crucial era in German and European literature.

According to Vicki Mistacco, Louise de Keralio's (1756-1822) translations of John Carr's *Voyage en Hollande* and *L'Etranger en Irlande* elevate a seemingly modest «feminine» activity into a medium for intellectual expression. By incorporating extensive paratexts – such as prefaces, footnotes, and a 225-page essay on Dutch commerce – Keralio expands Carr's works, using them as a platform to engage with political, historical, and other diverse subjects. Mistacco also notes that Keralio, while avoiding Napoleonic censorship, advocates for a

transnational «république universelle», challenging imperialism with a vision of shared knowledge. However, Mistacco expresses concerns about effectiveness of Keralio's strategic use of travel literature as a vehicle for her ideas: she did not find the audience she expected, or rather, the audience did not find her.

Finally, in section 3, *In Full View*, Susan Lauffer O'Hara reconsiders Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), offering a critique of interpretations of her as a devout Protestant. This essay examines passages inspired by the *Song of Songs* and the narrator's ironic confession of profanity in eroticizing the risen Christ. O'Hara suggests that Lanyer's use of satire and parody challenges the conventions of affective piety and confession, revealing her poetry as a subversive critique of early modern religious and social norms. Through this lens, Lanyer's work exemplifies the bold literary strategies employed by women writers to navigate and challenge restrictive decorum.

The *Nonsense of Common-Sense* (1737-1738), the first English journal edited by a woman, was helmed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), a Georgian-era writer and advocate of Robert Walpole's government. Roberto Bordoli displays that, opposing the Country Party and figures like Bolingbroke and Pope, Lady Mary envisioned a modern society founded on freedom, education, and equality, rejecting nostalgic politics. Her writings spanned politics, ethics, economics, women's rights, health, and press freedom, blending Enlightenment ideals with literary acumen. According to Bordoli, her themes remain pertinent to contemporary democratic discourse.

Elena Mucenì's article examines the emergence of Émilie Du Châtelet (1706-1749) and Laura Bassi (1711-1778) as pivotal figures in the paradigm of the «accredited» woman philosopher during the first half of the 18th century. It explores the external factors and internal motivations that enabled them to transition from students to teachers in a male-dominated intellectual sphere. Despite systemic barriers, these women achieved public recognition, with their works printed and images engraved in contemporary scientific literature. Their accomplishments highlight individual strategies to navigate and partially overcome societal constraints on women's participation in culture and knowledge.

In 1801, Sylvain Maréchal published a brief work which provoked a fervent debate, the *Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes*. Even in contemporary readings, the numerous overtly misogynistic stereotypes presented by Maréchal continue to elicit strong indignation from both scholars and the general public. According to Debora Sicco, Maréchal's provocative writing can only be fully understood in the context of its time. Her article examines responses from Albertine Clément-Hémery and, particularly, Marie-Armande Jeanne Gacon-Dufour, who is suggested to have collaborated with Maréchal. The discussion extends to women's access to culture and the consequences of women assuming male roles, as illustrated in two novels: *La femme abbé* by Maréchal and *La femme grenadier* by Gacon-Dufour.

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Emilio Maria De Tommaso
Università Telematica degli Studi IUL, Firenze
✉ e.detommaso@iuline.it

Delfina Giovannozzi
Istituto per il Lessico Intellettuale Europeo e Storia
delle Idee (CNR-ILIESI)
✉ delfina.giovannozzi@cnr.it