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978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700), Mary Astell (1666–1731) wryly observes that it is ‘Men who dispute for Truth as well as Men who argue against it; Histories are writ by them, they recount each others great Exploits, and have always done so.’¹ It might have pleased Astell to learn that, more than three hundred years later, many women would also be historians, and that women’s exploits now rate a mention in the standard history books. More recently, women’s intellectual history has also begun to receive scholarly attention. In the case of the history of political thought, there have been several articles about women’s political ideas, and a few monographs devoted to individual figures,² as well as collections of essays on female political thinkers in particular historical periods and locations.³ Recent developments in this area are partly due to the fact that women’s political texts are now more publicly available than ever before.⁴ But Astell’s observation still holds true in one respect: even

¹ Mary Astell, *Reflections Upon Marriage*, in *Astell: Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 77.

² See Kate Langdon Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Barbara Stephenson, *The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Anna Battigelli, *Margaret Cavendish and the Exiles of the Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Patricia Springborg, *Mary Astell: Theorist of Freedom from Domination* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Virginia Sapiro, *Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³ Consider, for example, Hilda L. Smith (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); Tjiske Akkerman and Siep Stuurman (eds.), *Perspectives on Feminist Political Thought in European History from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (eds.), *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400–1800* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

⁴ The accessibility of English women’s texts has been vastly improved by online collections such as *Early English Books Online (EEBO)* and *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO)*. There are also now a few anthologies of women’s political writings: Lynn McDonald (ed.), *Women Theorists on Society and Politics* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998); Hilda L. Smith and Berenice A. Carroll (eds.), *Women’s Political and Social Thought: An Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Kirstin Waters (ed.), *Women and Men Political Theorists: Enlightened Conversations* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); and Hilda L. Smith, Mihoko

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Women's political thought in Europe, 1400–1700

though the best-known histories of political thought are no longer written solely by men, they still tend to be *about* men – especially well-known men, such as Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. In this book, we aim to redress the imbalance by providing a history of women's political thought in Europe from the late medieval to the early modern period. The names of the women we discuss may not all be as familiar as those of the men: our subjects include Christine de Pizan, Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, Laura Cereta, Marguerite de Navarre, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Jeanne d'Albret, Arcangela Tarabotti, Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Marie le Jars de Gournay, Katherine Chidley, Elizabeth Poole, Priscilla Cotton, Margaret Fell Fox, Queen Christina of Sweden, Madeleine de Scudéry, Margaret Cavendish, Elisabeth of Bohemia, Elinor James, Joan Whitrowe, Anne Docwra, Damaris Masham, Mary Astell, and Gabrielle Suchon – among others. Though some of these women are no longer famous, many of them were known by, and compared to, famous male theorists of their time and discussed similar political issues in their works.

Some scholars might doubt the need to devote a book to female political thinkers alone. They might argue that it is easier to assess the significance and coherence of women's political ideas when they are placed alongside those of the other sex; and they might point out that, apart from their gender, these women have very little in common socially, geographically, chronologically, or ideologically speaking. But these are observations that might be made about the majority of histories of political thought – histories that are seriously incomplete because they ignore women thinkers. In any case, we do not completely disregard male thought. Many of the women we discuss developed their work in response to male authors, and so we do consider the political ideas of men such as Aristotle, John of Salisbury, Dante, John Knox, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke.

But we also think that women's consciousness of gender in their political thought is enough to warrant giving them a volume of their own. It has been a common criticism of male political theorists that they tend to forget about women, or that women are rendered invisible in their

Suzuki, and Susan Wiseman (eds.), *Women's Political Writings, 1610–1725*, 4 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007). The Cambridge University Press series 'Texts in the History of Political Thought' includes *Astell: Political Writings*; Margaret Cavendish, *Political Writings*, ed. Susan James (2003); Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, ed. and trans. Kate Langdon Forhan (1994); and Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (1995).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

political discussions of family and citizenship. In her highly influential work *The Sexual Contract* (1988), Carole Pateman observes that, in the standard histories of social contract theory, there is a great, repressive silence about women: their subordination to men is assumed but never explicitly acknowledged.⁵ She argues that prior to the original contract (a pragmatic justification of political authority and obedience), there must be another agreement made between men for the purpose of dominating and controlling women – the sexual contract. More recently, Hilda L. Smith has argued that the early modern concept of citizenship implicitly excludes women.⁶ Though ‘the citizen’ is intended to be a universal concept, applicable to both men and women, on closer inspection it turns out to be reflective of male experience alone. In this book, we do not deny that men have thought of themselves as paradigm citizens.⁷ But we do offer a somewhat revised history of political thought: we show that not all political writing in the pre-Enlightenment era renders women invisible, or fails explicitly to mention the female sex and their political subordination or exclusion.⁸ We examine what happens when the ‘subjects’ start to speak (to borrow a post-modern phrase) or when women of the past developed their own political theories and opinions. For some modern feminists, the results may be surprising, and, perhaps, sometimes disappointing.⁹ Against their misogynist critics, these women defend their capacity for political virtue, they argue for women’s prudence, they defend female monarchs, and they call for female liberty of conscience against the tyranny of men. Yet many are intolerant and conservative, critical of those who bring about social disorder for the sake of religious freedom and they are committed to individual virtue and passive obedience to authority. In some cases, there is also acceptance, and even justification, of women’s subordination to men.

⁵ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988).

⁶ Hilda L. Smith, *All Men and Both Sexes: Gender, Politics, and the False Universal in England, 1640–1832* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

⁷ In addition, we do not deny that when male theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau do mention women, they typically offer justifications of women’s subordination to men. On this topic, see Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁸ To be fair, in a more recent article, Pateman observes that a history of political thought without women’s ideas is but a ‘truncated and partial’ story; see Carole Pateman, ‘Women’s Writing, Women’s Standing: Theory and Politics in the Early Modern Period’, in Smith (ed.), *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, pp. 365–82 (esp. 367).

⁹ See Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 237, and Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). Both King and Scott express disappointment at the conservatism of the historical women they study.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Often, as Mary Astell observed in 1700, these women 'Love their Chains' and think 'as humbly of themselves as their Masters can wish'.¹⁰ Instead of calling for equal liberty, many women emphasise the duty of all human beings to accept subordination to a higher authority. Such women insist that even a prince is subordinate to God, and that love of God and humility are virtues that men (as well as women) ought to acquire. But whatever the viewpoint, these female political thinkers do not forget about women: they consider the implications of their general political theories for women as well as men. In this respect, regardless of a lack of radicalism in some areas, a history of women's political thought can offer a different political perspective to that of the standard, exclusively male, histories.

A major methodological question raised by this research is: what constitutes political thought and what counts as a political text? In modern political theory, politics is often regarded as a separate sphere from ethics. Theorists concentrate on questions concerning power, the foundations and limits of political authority, the nature of political obligation, and the tensions between liberty and distributive justice. On this reading, the key concepts – to put it rather simply – are *rights* and *obligations*, whether they are the rights (or entitlements) and obligations of sovereigns, or the rights and obligations of subjects, and so on. Political texts are those that discuss sovereign power (such as democratic, oligarchic, or monarchic power) and the relations between sovereigns and subjects. Among the texts we consider, some conform to this paradigm and others do not. In the later chapters of this work, we examine women's ideas about the basis of political authority, their theories about the best forms of political organisation, their justifications of political obedience or political resistance, and their various concepts of liberty in both the family and the state. We also discuss the extent to which these ideas about authority, obedience, and liberty are applied to the situation of women. But we maintain that this modern paradigm of political thought is open to question: it is the result both of the occlusion or forgetting of an earlier political tradition, and of the exclusion of women and their concerns from standard political theory. Our research thus expands the domain of the political in two respects. First, it returns to the ancient Aristotelian paradigm in which politics and ethics are united rather than opposed. Secondly, it includes sexual politics, and so we cover texts such as Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* and Madeleine de Scudéry's *Clélie* which are not usually thought of as political.

¹⁰ Astell, *Reflections*, p. 29.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

For Aristotle and the Stoic writers Seneca and Cicero (who accepted the Aristotelian framework), the key political concepts are not rights and obligations but *virtue* and *the good*.¹¹ Aristotle's political thought begins with the premise that an individual's participation in the political community is necessary in order for that individual to attain the good life (*eudaimonia*). In Aristotle's *Politics*, the city-state or *polis* is not regarded as external to, or pitted against, the individual, but rather as the natural means by which the individual is able to achieve the good. When Aristotle discusses the best form of political organisation, he discusses it with regard to the form that will best promote the good life, and he sees the virtues as habits that are conducive to this end. In this tradition ethics, the nature of virtue, and politics are inextricably connected. Developing Aristotle's thought, the Stoics identify the good life with a life of virtue, while the Epicureans make virtue a means to pleasure in a broad sense (identified with *eudaimonia*). The Aristotelian approach to political thought focuses on the appropriate character and virtues of members of the *polis*, on issues such as civic friendship, and the best organisation for promoting the best kind of life – topics that have not been central to modern political thought. In the late medieval and Renaissance periods, the Aristotelian political outlook was adapted by Giles of Rome, John of Salisbury, and St Thomas Aquinas. During this period, the writings of Aristotle and his Roman descendants, particularly Seneca and Cicero, shaped and informed the subject matter of political philosophy, for both male and female authors alike.

Women writers of the fifteenth century adapt and critique this tradition. The Aristotelian subject matter arises most strongly in their defence of women's capacity for virtue. Their approach can be summed up by the idea, expressed by Christine de Pizan, that the good of the city is the good of all its inhabitants, male as well as female. They insist that women are capable of exercising all the virtues, and should be encouraged to develop them. In his *Politics*, Aristotle implies that women do not have the prime political virtue of prudence (*phronesis*), or the capacity to discern good from evil in their practical deliberations. By denying women this capacity, he appears to justify the exclusion of women from political authority, their subordination to men, and their lack of qualification for full citizenship. Women such as Christine de Pizan, Elizabeth I, and Lucrezia Marinella explicitly challenge Aristotle's denial of prudence to the female

¹¹ For a nice summary of this topic, see C. C. W. Taylor, 'Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 233–58 (esp. 233–5).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
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Excerpt

[More information](#)

sex and his exclusion of women from participation in the *polis*. Other women, such as Laura Cereta, Marguerite de Navarre, and Madeleine de Scudéry, question his assumptions concerning the nature of virtue. Humility is not a virtue recognised by Aristotle, but these women exploit the tradition of Christian virtue and promote humility in opposition to arrogant pagan morality. Opposing Aristotelian and medieval representations of women as morally inferior, women defend their moral worth, question men's virtue, and propose new paradigms of the relations between men and women. Based on a reading of Christianity according to which grace is offered to the powerless, Marguerite hints that women may be spiritually and morally superior to men. Marinella goes further and adapts Platonist doctrine to establish women's moral superiority and the injustice of their subjection to men. We thus demonstrate the existence of a well-established tradition of women's thought grounded in a Christian synthesis of classical Aristotelian and Stoic political ideas, which elevates women's political contribution by equating the good life with the exercise of virtue.

In pre-Enlightenment Europe, political thought was intertwined not only with ethics and virtue, but also with religion and salvation. The synthesis of political and religious thought continued well into the seventeenth century: a strong religio-political outlook can be found in the works of Marie le Jars de Gournay, Elizabeth Poole, Mary Pope, Elinor James, Gabrielle Suchon, and Mary Astell, among others. These women uphold a divine conception of kingship and a view of monarchs as God's instruments on earth; they have a pastoral conception of the monarch as a protector of souls as well as bodies; and they offer Scripture-based arguments in favour of obedience to both just rulers and irreligious tyrants. Some women also offer biblical arguments in favour of women's political subordination to men. But in other women's writings of the time, religion is not the entirely conservative or limiting force that we might expect it to be.¹² The writings of English women petitioners during the Civil War, and Quaker women such as Priscilla Cotton, Mary Cole, Margaret Fell Fox, and Anne Docwra, reveal that the Bible can be interpreted in a politically progressive fashion. These women argue in favour of egalitarianism, liberty of conscience, social justice for the poor, and the toleration of religious diversity. They do not argue in favour of full citizenship for women, or their freedom from political subordination to men but they do highlight

¹² On this topic more generally, see Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1720* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

women's equal interest in liberty of conscience (or freedom of worship), they argue in favour of women's spiritual equality with men, and they defend the authority of women to speak in church. The long-lived popularity of Aristotelian and Stoic ideas concerning good government and virtue is apparent in other women's writings. In the late seventeenth century, in the works of Damaris Masham, Gabrielle Suchon, and Mary Astell, we start to see arguments in favour of women's intellectual cultivation both for the sake of the country, and for the sake of women's own virtue and salvation.

Our expansion of the domain of political thought results in a broadening of the texts that we read as political. Modern political theorists tend to concentrate their studies on prose treatises that deal exclusively with issues of power and the legitimacy of the state. Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), and John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) form the backbone of contemporary academic discussion on historical political theory. Some of the works that we examine conform to this standard. Christine de Pizan's *Book of the Body Politic* (1407) and *Book of Peace* (1412–14), and Marie le Jars de Gournay's 'Farewell of the Soul of the King' (1610) are political treatises that concentrate on the practice of good government and the relative rights and responsibilities of monarchs and subjects. The politics of relations between the sexes is also discussed in polemical writings that are not too different from the standard political treatises: Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), Moderata Fonte's *The Worth of Women* (1600), Arcangela Tarabotti's *Paternal Tyranny* (1643), Marie le Jars de Gournay's *The Equality of Men and Women* (1624), and perhaps Mary Astell's *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) are cases in point. But many women's works fall outside the standard models. Often women writers express their ideas about the ideal state, relations between the sexes, and other political issues through fiction, poems, pamphlets, petitions, and plays. In doing so, they were typically following the fashion of the era in which they wrote. In the early modern period and before, men sometimes expressed their political views through the medium of poetry, as in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and in fictional pieces, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). In the following chapters, we include a discussion of some of the most influential works in these genres, though it has been impossible to comment on every politically significant literary production by a woman.

This leads us to a final methodological question: what are the criteria for inclusion in our history? Why do we include some writers and not

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Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green

Excerpt

[More information](#)

others? Needless to say, the first criterion is gender: because we propose to address the forgotten or neglected history of women's political thought, the political texts in our study must be written by women. In the case of multi-authored and anonymous or pseudonymous works, this is not a straightforward matter. We know that Elizabeth I played a significant role in the writing of her speeches and prayers, but there is evidence that these were also the products of collaboration with male counsellors. Similarly, though many women's petitions of the English Civil War era were written from a female point of view, and were presented to parliament by women, there is some question about women's authorial role in the petitions. We include discussion of both Elizabeth and the Civil War women, however, because there is plausible evidence on the side of female authorship: Elizabeth was a highly educated, authoritative woman who played a hands-on role in the fashioning of her public persona; and there is historical and textual evidence that Katherine Chidley may have played a leading part in the writing of the Leveller women's petitions. Second, we include only those women writers who articulate a coherent political viewpoint, according to the definition of political thought discussed above. In some cases, such as those of the English queens Mary I and Mary II, there is simply not enough extant material to discern any particular viewpoint. The same problem arises with regard to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Queen Christina of Sweden, though we do briefly discuss their extant opinions in relation to wider political themes.

Many historiographical conclusions might be drawn from our account of women's political ideas. According to the standard, all-male accounts, the history of political thought is a history in which natural justifications of political authority (such as patriarchalism and divine right theory) are overthrown by conventional or contractual theories;¹³ biblical and authority-based arguments are replaced by appeal to reason and rational principles, and the religious world view gives way to the secular, liberal philosophy of the Enlightenment – a philosophy in which liberty, equality, and toleration play a central role. But these accounts may be the result of historians concentrating on works that ground future trends, rather than those that express widely accepted platitudes of the period in question. Recent revisionist historians have challenged the idea of a smooth and uncomplicated progress toward Enlightenment political ideals. The study of women's political writings may also lead to a shift in

¹³ See Gordon J. Schochet, *The Authoritarian Family and Political Attitudes in 17th Century England: Patriarchalism in Political Thought* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1988).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

our thinking about such progress. These texts come with little scholarly baggage, and so the reader must evaluate them on their own terms: we must pay attention to what the women actually said rather than what current scholars say about them. Taken collectively, women's political writings offer a different – and, in many cases, a woman-centred – perspective on central problems and classic works within the history of political thought. Their texts can be an affront to our modern ways of thinking. Seemingly familiar political concepts – such as prudence, liberty, toleration, equality, and self-preservation – have quite different connotations when discussed in their original religio-political contexts. In addition, our study shows that feminist political thought has had a longer pre-history than many theorists have recognised. The gender concerns of pre-Enlightenment women may not always be secular or liberal in content, but they are nevertheless recognisably feminist or proto-feminist in spirit.

Finally, it must be noted that many of these women acknowledge the existence of their female predecessors. Some continental women, such as Madeleine de Scudéry, make a conscious effort to represent themselves as part of a female 'republic of letters'. Many women cite past queens and other female political figures, such as Joan of Arc and the Amazons, as inspiration for their political writings. Others legitimate their political activism in print by appealing to a long tradition of women, especially biblical exempla and sibyls or prophetesses, who were authoritative political advisers. There is also a plausible case to be made for the continuing influence of Christine de Pizan: many women who exercised political authority in the Renaissance period – including, in France, Anne de Beaujeu, Margaret of Austria, Louise of Savoy, and Marguerite de Navarre – were familiar with Christine's works; and in England, it seems likely that Elizabeth I and Margaret Cavendish also had access to Christine's writings. Many would agree that, in order to move forward politically, women need to develop a consciousness of themselves as political actors and theorists who belong to a tradition of female thought. In writing this history, we hope to have contributed to women's growing historical self-consciousness, and to have demonstrated that women made a far more profound contribution to the development of European political ideas than has been generally acknowledged.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88817-2 - A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400-1700
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Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Christine de Pizan

Christine de Pizan (1364–1430) lived in France from the reign of Charles V, through the madness of Charles VI, until the year in which the appearance of Joan of Arc secured the succession of Charles VII. Christine thus suffered the effects of the conflict between the Armagnacs and Burgundians, which had one of its murderous climaxes in the Cabochien uprising of 1413. During this period, she wrote a number of works promoting princely virtue, often intended for Louis of Guyenne, the eldest son of Charles VI, and Isabeau de Bavière, who, she hoped, might ultimately take over the government and secure the peace. She also wrote during a period that famously consolidated the authority of vernacular literature. Against the background of the dissemination of translations of classical thought to a courtly and lay audience, promoted by Charles V, Christine was able to establish herself as an authoritative female writer. In 1403, Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, invited her to write a history of Charles V. In response Christine painted an idealised portrait of this king, whose prudence, justice, and capacity to maintain the peace and prosperity of France constituted for her the ideal princely government. Christine also wrote works defending women, for which she is now best known. In this chapter, we examine the way in which her meditation on the nature of good government interconnects with her defence of women's authority.

As a child, Christine travelled from Venice, where she was born, to Paris, where she lived most of her life, and wrote the vast majority of her works. She undertook this journey because of the fame of her father, Tomasso Pizzano, a contemporary of Francesco Petrarch (1304–74). Some years earlier, he had been invited to the court of the French king, Charles V, and had been persuaded to remain in Paris. His daughter and wife followed him, taking the long and arduous journey across the Alps a few years later. Thus in her person Christine could be said to have embodied the humanist project of *translatio studii*, the dissemination of classical knowledge from the heartland of classical thought to the more