Theorizing on Equality: Marie de Gournay and Poullain de la Barre

by
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Any discourse on equality produced in seventeenth-century France must be considered symptomatic. Obsession with categories and hierarchies characterizes and strains social relations of the period. The issue of equality with regard to women was a particularly popular topic, inherited from the lively tradition of the *querelle des femmes* and eventually subsumed under the rubric of the more contemporary *querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. Two authors from this period, Marie de Gournay and Poullain de la Barre, are singled out as worthy of mention in Marks' and de Courtivron's introduction to *New French Feminisms*. They are cited as "the two outstanding feminist writers between Christine de Pisan and Simone de Beauvoir" (6), but not without reservations. Marks and de Courtivron recognize the dilemma inherent to assuming any position of arguing for women's equality from within traditional systems of thought. Feminist discourse there will be, of necessity, like all *discours contestataire*, reactionary, referring itself always to the prevailing masculinist discourse, challenging patriarchal order with patriarchically invented tools, hence self-alienating and self-subverting, always determined by and inscribed within the very system it contests. Theorizing on equality yields little ground, whereas historicizing difference at least reworks the ground.

I propose to look at the treatises of Marie de Gournay and Poullain de la Barre in relation to the ideological systems that inform them, and in relation to the ideological systems that inform them, and in relation to each other. In the case of Gournay's *L'Egalité des hommes et des femmes* we have a text classed as a product of the "humanist" tradition, where in Poullain's *De l'égalité des deux sexes*[1] we have a ground-breaking example of "rationalist" enquiry (Marks and Courtivron 8). Both authors were intent upon proving the equality of men and women with the tools available through their respective systems, but both also have significant personal agenda that must be factored in to consideration of their enterprises. The

relations structured by the two narrators to their readerships are symptomatic of their relationship to the subject. Articulated through these are two radically different projects: on the one hand, to appeal to the membership of the dominant group, to be recognized as enjoying equal status and allowed to join the club; on the other, to challenge that membership, to destroy the club and start a new one.

In order to consider closely the two sorts of discourse, I have chosen to focus on one of the features the two texts share: allusions to Plato and Aristotle. I am not so much interested in determining whether the positions of these two philosophers are accurately represented by Gournay and Poullain as I am in observing how they are invoked and used in the "humanist" and the "rationalist" discourses respectively. Nor do I look at the cogent arguments that both authors develop to demonstrate that the status of women has been culturally rather than naturally determined, or their mutual conviction that the key to equality is education. My interest here is less in what they say than in how they say it.

Let us begin with the 1622 "humanist" discourse of Gournay. One of the first striking characteristics is the uncanny resemblance of her voice to another's. A general truism inaugurates this text:

> La pluspart de ceux qui prennent la cause, des femmes contre cette orgueilleuse preferance que les hommes s'attribuent, leur rendent le change entier: r'envoyans la preferance vers elles. (61)

The process begins whereby the writing subject situates and identifies itself through a dialogical relation to others who have pronounced on the subject. The narrator dissociates her position from that of these overzealous defenders, and distinguishes herself as taking a moderate stand: "Moy qui fuys toutes extremitez..." The familiarity of this tactic, mobile and reasonable, self-searching and -asserting, rings a bell, and echos of Montaigne sound distantly henceforth throughout the text.[2] It should come as no surprise that his "fille d'alliance" emits a textual voice so in conformity with his, since it was that recognition of spiritual compatibility which brought them together in the first place. Nevertheless, the resonance is disconcerting, and leads one to wonder where he leaves off

and she begins. To what extent that chord has been deliberately and strategically struck to consecrate the text under the aegis of Montaigne provokes further thought. Is it intended to serve as a reminder to her readership (which is assumed by the narrator to be male) that at least one significant figure has deemed her worthy of serious conversation? It also reminds this latter-day reader that she is writing in the shadow of a father figure. Given the climate for women writers in her day, it is understandable that she should have sought to fortify her position by reference, however subtle, to her friend and ally, a bona fide member of the club.[3]

The paternity motif permeates the text, and informs its very texture. As Gournay argues for the equality of women and men, she observes proper humanist protocol. She insists on keeping company with the great figures of Classical thinking, and on finding in their writing justification for her own ideas. To do so she is often reduced to distorting, even repressing their positions, but she needs the authority of their approbation to establish credence for her own. Often she merely provides litanies of great names that function as synonyms for truth, studding her text with incontrovertible evidence. Indeed, she as much as claims this to be her strategy:

> Et si je juge bien, soit de la dignité, soit de la capacité des dames, je ne pretends pas a cette heure de le prouver par raisons, puisque les opiniastres les pouroient debattre, ny par exemples, d'autant qu'ils sont trop communs; ains seulement par l'aucthorité de Dieu mesme, des arcsboutans de son Eglise et de ces grands hommes qui ont servy de lumiere a l'Univers. (63)

The list of names she offers in her text is impressive, but the statements associated with those names are more often than not unconvincing. Reasoning within the christian humanist framework, and subscribing unquestioningly to the prescriptive code of the *bienséances* for women's comportment, she is reduced to feeble assertions such as the following:

> Et si les hommes se vantent, que Jesus-Christ soit nay de leur sexe, on respond, qu'il le falloit par necessaire biensceance, ne se pouvant pas sans scandale, mesler jeune et à toutes les heures du

> jour et de la nuict parmi les presses aux fins de convertir, secourir et sauver le genre humain, s'il eust été du sexe des femmes. (75)

Although she has ostensibly renounced tactics of argument and example, she does in fact argue, and persuasively, when following her own line of reasoning, against custom. She recognizes in tradition an agent of oppression, specifically insofar as it denies women the right to education. She notes that national temperaments and immediate environments have produced degrees of oppressive tradition, creating more difference among women according to the amount of education allowed them in their respective societies--urban / provincial, French/ Italian / English, than between men and women (65).

As for examples, she limits mention of meritorious women to a few, noting that she is reluctant to cite what might be simply dismissed as exceptional instances. The three examples she does offer though are telling: Judith, Joan of Arc, Mary Magdalen--three women who abetted decisively the projects of their besieged masters and ministered to their needs. Although she has wryly noted earlier that when men admire women, they bestow upon them their ultimate compliment--that they are just like men, she appears to forget her own insight on the androcentrism of the prevalent value system. The examples she chooses to illustrate the excellence of women fit a commonly valorized female profile, women who have saved the day or made the day for their men. Gournay becomes mired in the very ground which is supposed to support her stand.

Let us consider how she invokes Plato. He figures at the head of her list of "glorieux tesmoins" to the equality of women:

> Platon à qui nul n'a debattu le tiltre de divin, et consequemment Socrates son interprete... leur assignent mesmes droicts, facultez et functions, en leurs Republiques et par tout ailleurs. (63-64)

It does not occur to her to contest Plato's status or to explore his various and in fact contradictory pronouncements in order to assess his stand on women. All that is required for her purposes in an inclusion of this authority figure in her text to lend weight to her words.

The narrator's allusion to Aristotle is more circumspect. So intent is she upon mustering a powerful constituency that she commits an infraction against the humanist ideal of comprehensive erudition. She chooses the safer tactic of claiming possible ignorance rather than venturing to deal with this philosopher's actual and most problematic pronouncements on women. Her 'humanist' argument requires at least a passing reference to him:

> Quant au philosophe Aristote, puisque remuant Ciel et terre, il n'a point contredit en gros, que je scache, l'opinion qui favorise les dames, il l'a confirmée: s'en rapportant, sans doubte, aux sentences de son pere et grand pere spirituels, Socrates et Platon, comme à chose constante et fixe soubs le credit de tels personnages: par la bouche desquels il faut advouer que le genre humain tout entier, et la raison mesme, ont prononcé leur arrest. (67)

Gournay constructs a figurative patriarchal genealogy--sons, fathers and grandfathers constitute an intellectual chain in which there is no place for her. She thus writes herself out of her own argument in the very attempt to claim a place for herself within and through it. Dutiful respect for precedence and authority characterizes Gournay's rhetoric, and contributes to explain the frustration she felt at being denied recognition and entry to the 'République' by her contemporaries. Her subscription to the humanist canon brought her for the most part only derision. Although she illustrated by her text that she was capable of engaging in dialogue with great minds and thinking great thoughts, that she was erudite and committed to the world of ideas and writing, there was no place for her, even in her own text, written according to the tenets of that world.

Little surprise that in 1626 she gave vent to her bitterness and anger in *Grief des dames*, still fixated on ther other, the uncooperative male readership:

> Bien-heureux es-tu, lecteur, si tu n'es point de ce sexe, qu'on interdict de tous les biens, l'interdisant de la liberté: ouy qu'on interdict encore à peu près, de toutes les vertus, luy soustrayant le pouvoir, en la moderation duquel la pluspart, d'elles se forment; afin de luy constituer

> pour seule felicité, pour vertus souveraines et seules, ignorer, faire le sot et servir." (89)

Here is a much more powerful statement, a diatribe fuelled by anger. The will to please has been succeeded by the determination to speak out, to accuse and attack that rejecting readership. Strategies of deferent onomastics drop out and a genuine voice of outrage takes over. The dutiful daughter revolts, but will remain trapped in her learned androcentric ways.

The final outburst of *Grief* attests to the degree to which she was self-alienated in the humanist rhetoric: "l'ignorance est mere de presomption" (97). The gender-coded metaphor, a commonplace then and even now, connotes a correspondence not only between the two terms of comparison but with the mediating term as well, thus suggesting an infelicitous affinity not only between ignorance and presumption, but among "ignorance," "mere" and "presomption." Her unquestioning recourse to a standard patriarchal metaphor in the very act of decrying patriarchal prejudice subverts her own attempt at self-affirmation. She is in no position to 'flee extremes' as long as they inform the only language she knows. Rather than look to herself, as her adoptive father Montaigne had done so profitably for himself, she persisted obstinately in looking to the other, in knocking at the father's door, in speaking the father's language, demanding entry to No-Woman's-Land.

Poullain, on the other hand, by sole virtue of his sex, was not condemned like women to "ignorer, faire le sot et servir." At ease in the social, intellectual and religious climate of his time, he found in Cartesianism a powerful tool against tradition and prejudice, and, in the question of the equality of the sexes, a lively and controversial issue appropriate to serve as vehicle for demonstrating and disseminating the validity of the rationalist approach.[7] While such motivation might be dismissed as simply opportunistic, probably more telling is the narrator's relation to his subject. Gournay's texts can be read as those of the devout daughter offering obedient subscription to the patriarchal world of letters, angered by its rejection but persistent nonetheless. Poullain's might be read as those of a son in revolt against the fathers of western thought. Social Cartesian, iconoclast, rebel, he would

topple the idols and follow the path of hiw own intellect. He begins where Gournay ends. In fact, his text takes up so many of the strands of Gournay's, that I wonder if he had it in mind as he wrote. He dismisses her touchstone, "l'Authorité des grands hommes et de l'Ecriture Sainte" to replace it with his own: "L'Authorité" ... de la Raison et du Bon Sens (p. 7).

Poullain does not propose to instate himself in place of the fathers. A crucial move in his argument (noted by Beauvoir and Alcover) (Beauvoir xxv; Alcover 37) is to undermine the authority of his own text, thereby forcing his readership to decide for itself what to make of his treatise, to be its own authority:

> On consideroit autrefois les femmes, comme l'on fait aujourd'huy, et avec aussi peu de raison. Ainsi tout ce qu'en on [sic; lire: ont] dit les hommes doit estre suspect, parce qu'ils sont Juges et parties;... (52)[4]

The generosity of this move, inviting not subscription but contestation, skepticism, attests to the good will of the narrator. He goes so far as to say that he expects and looks forward to debate with women themselves as they consider his argument:

> Je m'attends bien que ce traité ne leur échapera pas non plus: que plusieurs y trouverons à redire:... mais j'espère aussi que ma bonne volonté, et le dessein que j'ay pris de ne rien dire que de vray,... m'excuseront auprès d'elles. (34)

The *captatio* gesture seems highly unusual in the context of a reasoned treatise. Why should Poullain the good rationalist care whether he receives a positive reception from the object of his study? Is his project not a dispassionate examination of the facts in order to arrive at the truth? Apparently not. In fact "galanterie" and "amour," always suspected, as Poullain himself has noted, when men speak favorably of women, informs his own stance vis-à-vis his subject (9). He is unable or unwilling to objectivize the subject.

The split between reason and emotion, so basic to the cartesian method, is not altogether respected in Poullain's treatise. "Clarity, dispassion and detachment," the hallmarks of Descartes' epistemology, which tacitly informs

Poullain's approach, do not totally govern his text (Bordo 440). As a consequence, his argument is less convincing as an argument if more persuasive as a panegyric (42). His attachment to and experience of the historical subject interfere with his ability to distance himself, to treat the question of women as a purely cerebral issue. The consequences are mixed--simply put: poor Cartesianism and good feminism, and, at the same time, poor feminism and good Cartesianism. He will blindly indulge in adulation of qualities that have stereotyped women and imprisoned them in categories, he will attach to them unquestioning flattering clichés, he will attribute to their nature essential virtues that are simply consequences of the supportive and subordinate roles to which they have been relegated and which he is in the very process of describing. Many of these instances are linked to his discussions of woman in her capacity as mother with the standard virtues attached--compassion, patience, generosity, devotion (42). He is unable to separate from her, to establish that critical distance so central to the cartesian method of cognition.

On the other hand, his process of methodically comparing the two sexes, assuming patriarchical society to be the normative structure into which women might be more happily assimilated, will reinforce polarizing oppositions, thus further dividing the sexes and threatening his argument (33). More disturbingly, he will objectify women by categorizing them in his discourse as "le Sexe" (53) as if there were only one, thus representing himself and his kind as properly disembodied Cartesians. He will address a male readership and include himself in their ranks ("nous") even as he argues against them, thus textually constructing an exclusive community of male subjects. He will speak of women only in the third person in spite of his appeal to them as potential beneficiaries of his treatise, and so delimit them grammatically as the object, as the 'matter' of his enquiry (p. 83, as just one example).

At the same time, in his enthusiasm, he will claim for women superiority as opposed to the equality he is supposedly seeking to establish. He will coolly contextualize, historicize and dispel popular negative prejudices while further propagating positive ones. He will argue reasonable for women's rights, and at the same

time affectionately enshrine them. While such extravagant unruliness offends those exacting Cartesians who would have him adhere to the rules of the game, it is welcome to those recent critics of Descartes who decry his subordination of the passions to reason, who seek their revalorization in the realm of intellectual discourse, who critique "the Cartesian masculinization of thought."[11]

In a sense, Poullain's inability to split himself, to construct a purely rational argument at the expense of his emotional investment in the question, his failure as a strict cartesian, attests more powerfully to his conviction than all of the careful reasoning in the world. His is a voice committed to women not only in the abstract, not as a matter of principle, but in the concrete and the affective, whose experience got in the way of his thinking the question.

If Marie de Gournay can be read as the daughter who loved her father, Poullain features as the son who loved his mother. Freud has conditioned us to expect that son to seek to replace the father. Poullain played out the oedipal drama, challenging the patriarchal establishment, but attacking particularly viciously its most venerated fathers. Let us contrast his treatment of Plato and Aristotle with what we have just seen of Marie de Gournay's. Of Plato he says:

> Platon, le pere de la Philosophie ancienne remerçioit les Dieux de trois graces qu'ils luy avoient faites, mais particulierement de ce qu'il estoit né homme et non pas femme. S'il avoit en veüe leur condition presente, je serois bien de son avis; mais ce qui fait juger qu'il avoit autre chose dans l'esprit, c'est le doute qu'on dit qu'il témoignoit souvent s'il faloit mettre les femmes de la cathegorie des bestes. Cela suffiroit à des gens raisonnables pour le condamner luy même d'ignorance ou de bétise, et pour achever de le dégrader du tiltre de Divin qu'il n'a plus que parmy les pedans. (107)

To what extent is it for the very reason that Plato enjoyed the status of father ("le *pere* de la philosophie") that Poullain had to unseat him, basing his attack on mere hear-say ("le doute *qu'on dit* qu'il temoignoit"), and, completing that gesture of attack, stripping him of his title

within his own text? "Le tiltre de Divin" are the very words used by Gournay in her treatment of Plato. Although Poullain has the 'grace' not to name her (if this is indeed a direct allusion), she, along with her idol is by implication demoted, to "pedans." In fact, he may be covering for her, clearing the way and offering belatedly tools of thought that he sees as more useful to her than those she had at hand.

Aristotle also is sharply dismissed, and here Poullain offers to women, along with a gratuitous compliment, the idea of reversing the dynamics of the invidious comparison, of positing a gynocentric norm in the place of that inevitably defeating androcentric one. He invites them to assume their subjectivity, as he has his:

> Son disciple Aristote à qui l'on conserve encores dans les Ecoles le nom glorieux de Genie de la nature sur le préjugé qu'il l'a mieux connue qu'aucun autre Philosophe, prétend que les femmes ne sont que des Monstres... Pour estre Monstre, selon la pensée même de cét homme, il faut avoir quelque chose d'extraordinaire, et de surprenant. Les femmes n'ont rien de tout cela; elles ont toujours esté faites de mêmes, toujours belles et spirituelles; et si elles ne sont pas faites comme Aristote, elles peuvent dire aussi qu'Aristote n'estoit pas fait comme elles. (107-108)

Although still caught up in the dualistic warp, Poullain recognizes the liberatory impulses inherent to Descartes' method. The belief that the individual mind has the capacity to arrive independently at truth frees him of the burdensome authority of tradition, rids him of the father. He recognized that women had an even more urgent need than his own to free themselves of that same father. While he claims to have chosen to discourse on the subject of women because it was such a blatant example of prejudice, and thus a perfect opportunity to demonstrate the efficacity of the rational approach, it is obvious from the way he argues, both successfully and unsuccessfully, that he cares deeply about the subject.

The extent to which his gallant gesture of offering the treatise to women as helpful might be interpreted as paternal in turn can be debated:

> ...l'on avertit les personnes d'Esprit, et particulierement les Femmes qui ne sont point la Dupe de ceux qui prennent authorité sur elles, que si elles se donnent la peine de lire ce Traité, ... elles remarqueront que le Caractere essentiel de la verité, c'est la clarté et l'évidence. (11-12)

Here he is offering not himself as the new authority figure, but a mediating text that demonstrates tools utilized for women's benefit that they might take up and use for themselves. I prefer to think of this offering as a brotherly gesture, rather than a paternal one, with whatever new problematic that may imply. Indeed there is more of a conspiratorial ring to his espousal of the cause than a self-aggrandizing one. It was in the mutual interest of son and daughter, brother and sister, to undo the rule of the father, to revalorize the mother, to reinvent their relations to the world, to each other, together.

Poullain's sequel to his treatise represents just that sort of utopian project: *De l'education des dames* is made up a series of conversations among two men and two women--peers, cousins, friends, equals. The only possible sequel for Gournay, imprisoned within the humanist tradition, was the lone and angry, still ambivalent, diatribe of her *Grief*. For Poullain, dialogue among rational minds, male- and female-subjectivity, held out the promise of a new order. So he made women the object of his attention, he gallantly opened the door... and wrote them in.

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Notes

[1]The Fayard edition reads Poulain, whereas Alcover's book reads Poullain, the two spellings in this article are faithful to the texts I am quoting, and the inconsistency simply points to the instability of seventeenth-century orthography.

[2]*Essais* I: XXX, p. 195 and II: XII, pp. 540-1, to cite just two examples of a pervasive trait.

[3]Marjorie Henry Ilsley quotes Guez de Balzac in her book to suggest what a forbidding territory the "République des lettres" must have seemed to women who ventured to write:

> Il y a longtemps que je me suis déclaré contre cette pédanterie de l'autre sexe et que j'ai dit que je souffrirais plus volontiers une femme qui a de la barbe qu'une femme qui fait la savante... Tout de bon, si j'étais modérateur de la police, j'enverrais filer les femmes qui veulent faire des livres. (127)

[4]I am grateful to M. Alcover for pointing out that "on" is a mistake in the Fayard edition; the original reads "ont." The wording of Poullain's text is slightly different from Alcover's and Beauvoir's versions: "Tout ce qui a été écrit par les hommes sur les femmes doit être suspect, car ils sont à la fois juge et partie (52)."

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