

The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France: Women Writ, Women Writing.
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In response to persistently normative readings of women as subjects and authors of early modern texts, Stanton deploys the full breadth and depth of her considerable knowledge to present a range of texts, canonical and less well known, that complicate institutionalized gender norms and frequently even defy them. In the process, this study covers an impressive range of fields of inquiry, from medical (and pseudomedical) discourses, to political institutions, to pedagogy, showing that even in these often-repressive discourses, the norms of gender are revealed to be unstable, allowing for resistance and resignification in the form of counterdiscourses. In the first chapter, Stanton places the *Caquets de l'accouchée* (Cackles of the confined woman) in its social context to call into question the concept of the “classical body,” which has dominated scholarship on early modern French literature. In a move that I would have liked to see taken even further, Stanton questions what might be at stake for modern and postmodern criticism in “reaffirming old gendered scripts” (57). The

second chapter focuses on analysis of “constructions of women’s specificity” in Racine’s *Iphigenia*, and the reaffirmation of patriarchal social order by means of the sacrifice of the disorderly daughter figure rather than of the dutiful daughter. But this order is founded on shifting roles, as the multiple feminine figures in the play suggest the continual possibility of disorder, and as both Clytemnestra and Achilles call Agamemnon’s decision into question.

The third chapter provides an excellent analysis of the seventeenth-century debates concerning the education of women, focusing on François Poullain de la Barre’s works *On the Equality of the Sexes* and *On the Education of Ladies*, as well as François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon’s “regressive” *On the Education of Girls*. Stanton frames these works with a detailed account of the historical context, but also, more importantly, with an astute sense of the problematic nature of counterdiscourses in the context of structures of power-knowledge. Here the dynamics of gender come into play in a fuller sense, showing that discursive and counterdiscursive elements of various texts cannot simply be categorized into progressive or regressive categories, but serve multiple and often-contradictory functions of reaffirmation and resistance of gender norms. Nowhere, perhaps, is this contradiction more striking than in the memoirs of Catherine Meurdrac de La Guette, who seems to delight in blurring the lines between masculine and feminine dress and behavior, and who is particularly thrilled to be taken for a cross-dressed Count de Marsin. While she rejects the limitations of her gender role, refusing to be the well-bred and obedient daughter that we saw earlier in Stanton’s study in the form of Iphigenia, she does not allow for the same degree of agency in her daughter. In fact, she is defined by self-contradiction, as Stanton puts it: “A sexual mother, an adoring but unsubmitive wife, a deflating moralizer and godly deviant, a loyal monarchist who pays homage to the enemy, a bourgeois woman who claims to be inherently and essentially an aristocratic male warrior dressed up like a woman, ‘Madame de la Guette’ as a signifier subsumes an unresolved plurality of conflicting selves that signal the illusory unity of identity” (144). As such, she exemplifies the dynamic nature of gender that Stanton is analyzing in this study.

Stanton similarly revises modern notions of early modern maternity by examining the letters of Madame de Sévigné to her daughter in the context of medical discourses and literary intertexts. Her final chapter is a reading of Madame de Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Montpensier* that allows for the possibility of irony and a mimicry of gender norms that renders them questionable. While Madame de Noirmoutiers, who flaunts her adultery and defies social conventions, triumphs and flourishes, the guilt-ridden princess dies unhappy. This outcome calls into question the normative conclusions drawn from this tale. In the process of working through these rich texts, Stanton also calls the normative and counternormative discourses of theory into question, underscoring where even the resistant voices reaffirm norms and hierarchies, and suggesting that early modern literature sometimes points to “an elsewhere, to the production of an-other text that could be written” (200). In this richly interdisciplinary study, we see not only what gender might have been in the early modern period, but what it might yet be.

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