



The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century

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Desmond M. Clarke presents new translations of three of the first feminist tracts to support explicitly the equality of the sexes. The alleged inferiority of women's nature and the corresponding roles that women were (in)capable of exercising in society was debated in Western culture from the civilization of ancient Greece to the establishment of early Christian churches. There had also been some proponents of women's superiority (in comparison with men) prior to the early modern period. In contrast with both of these claims, the seventeenth century witnessed the first publications that argued for the equality of men and women. Among the most articulate and original defenders of that view were Marie le Jars de Gournay, Anna Maria van Schurman, and Francois Poulain de la Barre. Gournay published *The Equality of Men and Women* in Paris in 1622, while one of her Dutch correspondents, Van Schurman, published in Latin her *Dissertation* in support of women's education in 1641. Poulain wrote a radical *Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes* in 1673, which he also published in Paris. These three feminist tracts transformed the language and conceptual framework in which questions about women's equality or otherwise were subsequently discussed. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, anonymous plagiarized editions and pirated translations of Poulain's work appeared in English, as 'vindications' of the rights of women. This edition includes new translations, from French and Latin, of these three key texts, and excerpts from the authors' related writings, together with an extensive introduction to the religious and philosophical context within which they argued against the traditional view of women's natural inferiority to men.

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