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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

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A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL THOUGHT IN EUROPE, 1400-1700

This ground-breaking book surveys the history of women's political thought in Europe, from the late medieval period to the early modern era. The authors examine women's ideas about topics such as the basis of political authority, the best form of political organisation, justifications of obedience and resistance, and concepts of liberty, toleration, sociability, equality, and self-preservation. Women's ideas concerning relations between the sexes are discussed in tandem with their broader political outlooks; the authors demonstrate that the development of a distinctively sexual politics is reflected in women's critiques of marriage, the double standard, and women's exclusion from government. Women writers are also shown to be indebted to the ancient idea of political virtue, and to be acutely aware of being part of a long tradition of female political commentary. This work will be of tremendous interest to political philosophers, historians of ideas, and feminist scholars alike.

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For
Jeremy, Annalena, and Bethany
and
Tamsin, Michael, and Alexandra

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It is a common view that in the history of political thought there are no female figures on a par with men such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Our background and training in philosophy gave us little reason to doubt this received wisdom. But our first defence – to quote Judith Drake (*fl.* 1696–1723) – is that a man ought no more to boast of ‘being Wiser than a Woman, if he owe his Advantage to a better Education, and greater means of Information, then he ought to boast of his Courage, for beating a Man, when his Hands were bound’.¹ When it comes to the history of ideas in Europe from 1400 to 1700, women had their hands bound in many respects: through their lack of formal education in political rhetoric, their official exclusion from citizenship and government, the perception that women ought not to be involved in political affairs, and the view that it was immodest for a woman to write at all. But there is a remarkable number who escaped their bonds: some were educated to a high degree, some were self-educated, some attained the highest levels of government and political authority, others were counsellors and companions to queens; many wrote political commentaries in the guise of religious or prophetic works, and many of them defended their writings with appeal to biblical and secular precedent. Taken collectively, their works laid the foundations for subsequent generations of European women whose demands for equality in education, employment, and political representation are still not entirely met.

We began this project with the modest aim of showing simply that there is a history of women's political thought in Europe from 1400 to 1700. The result is an amalgam of our joint areas of expertise: Karen

¹ [Judith Drake], *An Essay In Defence of the Female Sex. In which are inserted the Characters Of A Pedant, A Squire, A Beau, A Vertuoso, A Poetaster, A City-Critick, &c. In a Letter to a Lady. Written by a Lady* (London: Printed for A. Roper, E. Wilkinson, and R. Clavel, 1696), p. 20.

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Green on women thinkers from the late medieval to the early modern period in Italy and France, and Jacqueline Broad on women of the early modern period in England. As historians of philosophy, we take a common philosophical approach to these women's writings: we focus primarily on concepts, ideas, and arguments rather than historical events and political actions (though we do discuss such subjects when they are relevant). We cannot claim to have written a definitive or comprehensive history: the terrain is simply too vast, and many of the political issues are too complex to be adequately addressed in a historical-intellectual overview. As a result, this book offers only one of many possible histories that could have been written. We do not discuss women from Germany, Spain, or the Netherlands. We do not comprehensively cover the implicit political themes in women's poetry, plays, and fictional works (though we do discuss some). We do not, moreover, offer a detailed account of how women have a different way of thinking politically compared to men, or a history of political thought 'in a different voice'. Had we attempted to discuss male thinkers by way of comparison, the end-product would have been gargantuan or else excessively simplistic.

There are at least three themes that emerge out of our research. First, we find that many women entered into the political discourse of their time aware that they were marked by men as political outsiders and inferiors. At risk of being anachronistic, we suggest that almost all the women we discuss were conscious of their *gender*. In many cases, this awareness influenced their political thinking such that they recognised the implications of their theories for women as a social group. Whether it be the idea that women are capable of political virtue, or that women's participation is vital to a flourishing political community, or justifications of women's subordination and arguments in favour of passive obedience to men, most female political thinkers made women politically visible. In this respect, we intend our work to be a consciousness-raising exercise: we hope to promote the idea that the female subject did exist, despite being a forgotten or repressed feature in the history of European political thought. Secondly, the study of these women demonstrates that the thought of early modern women has as much continuity with what came before as with what came after. For many scholars, the seventeenth century represents a crucial period in which modern ideals – such as feminism, liberalism, democracy, and secular political thought in general – first emerged on the political landscape. But we find that the early modern women have a great deal in common with their female predecessors in the late medieval era and the Renaissance, especially when

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it comes to the topics of political virtue, the religious foundations of political authority and marriage, and the comparative virtues of men and women. Thirdly, we found that many women writers were aware of their female predecessors and contemporaries, and that several fashioned themselves as part of a female intellectual tradition. Some continental women made a conscious effort to represent themselves as part of a female 'republic of letters'; some cited past queens and other female political figures as inspiration for their reflections; and others saw themselves as part of a long tradition of women (especially biblical women and sibyls or prophetesses) who spoke with authority on political subjects.

This book would not have been possible without the generous financial assistance of the Australian Research Council. The council awarded us a large Discovery Project grant in 2004 for the purposes of carrying out research into the history of women's political thought, and we are extremely grateful to them and to the anonymous ARC reviewers who saw the merit in our original proposal. We also thank the participants in our 2005 conference, 'Toward a History of Women's Political Thought, 1400-1800', many of whom contributed to our early thinking about who and what should be included in such a history. We are especially grateful to our keynote speakers at the conference – Hilda L. Smith, Sarah Hutton, Patricia Springborg, and Catherine Müller – for sharing their incomparable expertise in the area; to Earl Jeffrey Richards, for his participation and his ongoing support; and to Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt, for her help in organising the event. We are also grateful to the French Embassy for their sponsorship of Catherine Müller's participation, and to Edouard Mornaud of the Alliance Française de Melbourne, for organising this assistance and for providing the conference venue. We thank Springer Press for their permission to reproduce (in Chapter 6) sections of Jacqueline Broad's essay 'Liberty and the Right of Resistance: Women's Political Writings of the Civil War Era in England', published in our edited collection, *Virtue, Liberty, and Toleration: Political Ideas of European Women, 1400-1800*, edited by Jacqueline Broad and Karen Green (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007). We are also grateful to the church of Santa Trinità in Florence, Italy, for granting their kind permission to use Domenico Ghirlandaio's image *Sibilla* (from the Sassetti Chapel) on our dust-jacket. We would like to thank Hilary Gaskin and the anonymous CUP reviewers, for their many helpful and sensible suggestions on our draft manuscript; our colleagues in the Philosophy Department at Monash University, Melbourne, including Dirk Baltzly, John Bigelow, Sandra

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Bolton, Fiona Leigh, Justin Oakley, and Rob Sparrow; and our families (especially Sandra Broad), for their terrific support and encouragement. Finally, our work would have been poorer without the contribution of our research assistant, Nicole Kouros, who brought to the project both skills in Italian and a deep knowledge of Dante, as well as offering invaluable assistance in the preparation of the final manuscript.