

THE CONCEPT OF SERVITUDE IN EARLY MODERN FEMINIST WORKS

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AIM

This summer I provided research assistance to Prof. Sharp on her book project titled "Spinoza and Servitude." My involvement with the project was centered around understanding the usage of servitude as a concept by feminist thinkers in the early modern period. I was interested in the following questions:

- i) What do feminist thinkers mean by servitude when they use it to define their condition/s?
- ii) Do these thinkers take up the reality of chattel slavery while discussing their own servitude?

THINKERS READ

- Arcangela Tarabotti (*Paternal Tyranny*)
- Christine de Pizan (*The Book of The City of Ladies*)
- Gabrielle Suchon, (*Treatise on Ethics and Politics*)
- Lucrezia Marinella, (*The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*)
- Marie le Jars de Gournay, (*The Ladies' Complaint*)
- Madame de Maintenon (*On Constraint; Other Dialogues*)
- Mary Astell, (*Some Reflections Upon Marriage; A Serious Proposal to The Ladies*)
- Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*)
- Poulain de la Barre (*The Equality of the Two Sexes*)

SERVITUDE AS..

..LOSS OF CONTROL OVER ONE'S SOCIAL RELATIONS

For Tarabotti, difference has been stripped from the lives of nuns; their lives being characterized by solitude. For Astell, the wife is confined to the domestic sphere, being unable to be a social animal, and to fulfill her social needs. For Wollstonecraft, women are denied even the ability to choose to be alone and reflect, because of their constant obligations to others.

..LOSS OF THE SELF AND THE SOUL

For Suchon, women's enslavement is a condition of belonging to other and forgetting themselves: "...we no longer belong to ourselves if we lack the power to dispose of our own belongings and actions or if, in all things, our actions depend on the movement of others" For Wollstonecraft, women's confinement denies them the ability to develop virtue. She claims: "Confined then in cages like the feathered race, [women] have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch."

..DEPENDENCE MARKED BY IGNORANCE

"To defer to men's opinions on everything is to be a slave to their opinion of us" – Suchon
"[Women are reduced to being] slaves of Sense than Creatures endued with Reason" – Astell

"Many are the causes that, in the present corrupt state of society, contribute to enslave women by cramping their understandings and sharpening their senses. One, perhaps, that silently does more mischief than all the rest, is their disregard of order." – Wollstonecraft

"...women themselves tolerate their situation...either because they do not think at all about what they are, or because they are born and raised in a state of dependency, [where] they share the male point of view." – Poulain de la Barre

..LIVING IN FEAR OF AN UNKNOWN TYRRANICAL POWER

Madame de Maintenon describes marriage as a prison, primarily because women are given away, without choice, to a "master" they do not even know.
"The wife elects a monarch for life, giving him authority she cannot take back no matter how he behaves. She selects someone who puts her fortune and person in his own hands" - Astell

REFERENCES TO CHATTEL SLAVERY

While speaking of their own condition as servitude, feminist thinkers largely remain distant from the material reality of chattel slaves. However, even in the few instances where they mention slaves, it is mostly with the aim of criticizing other ideas, especially women's oppression, without criticizing chattel slavery.

Tarabotti remarks that husbands should pay money to get married, which would be as "decent" as masters buying their slaves. This is an instance where it is not just servitude in the abstract sense that is being used as a metaphor, but also the material reality of slaves themselves. It is unclear if Tarabotti implicitly accepts the master-slave relationship, but argues that the marital relationship should not be reduced to it.

Astell criticizes the condition of slaves in the American colonies, although in passing, while focusing on the cruelty of treating women like they were slaves.

"I may say Cruelty, it is now at in all the Easternparts of the World, where the Women, like our Negroes in our Western Plantations, are born slaves, and live Prisoners all their Lives." - Astell.