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As a preface

Mixing gender and reason
to find a new path

Beginning with the fundamental text *De l'égalité des deux sexes* by François Poullain de la La Barre¹, the female universe became the object of increasing and intense scrutiny and debate. Intellectuals, philosophers and doctors reacted stubbornly to progressive and excessively positive concepts regarding women's characteristics and potential, and instead began to re-propose obsolete atavistic theories based on the most sinister misogyny. They doubled down on the classic ideologies, with their cruel and offensive traits. However, at the same time, apparently new and very unusual phenomena began to emerge. Although women writers had already been present in previous centuries, albeit few and far between, they now had greater assertiveness and conviction. They began to publish and disseminate their works in completely original ways, adopting new methods, register and forms. They focused on Otherness, specifically on the gender differences that still existed in European society, politics, education, and the world of work.

1. F. Poullain de La Barre, *De l'égalité des deux sexes. Discours physique et moral où l'on voit l'importance de se defaire des préjugez*, Du Puis, Paris 1673.

The debate that followed was characterised sometimes by heated and belligerent tones, sometimes by attitudes of understanding and acquiescence. First it was conducted in a worthy and extremely interesting place: the salon. Such a room was a space perfectly suited for round-table discussion and the confrontation of opposing ideals, so much so that it became an identifying feature of the “civilization of conversation”². The newspapers, which reached a lower born but much more empathetic and interested audience, joined in, as did the theatre, on whose stage characters that cleverly embodied new and captivating figures took shape, worthy exemplars of the most characteristic models of modernity.

If we had to identify a precise period in which these heterogeneous cultural phenomena first came to the fore – to mix osmotically, without losing the roots of their original conceptions, and then to flow back into works of considerable importance – it would be the Enlightenment. However, extending chronologically the temporal boundaries of this fundamental moment in human history, we may use Diogenes’s lantern to search, in scattered glimmers of light, for the voices of women, and to understand from their point of view the depth and urgency of the debate.

Participation in the atavistic *querelle* was heterogeneous, polymorphous and changeable, but it is imperative that we seek reveal points of view stemming from an awareness of the injustice and disparity evident in the patriarchal society of the *Ancien Régime*. Women’s input on these issues, which we could define as metahistorical, was conspicuous and fresh. Personal letters expressing sentiments and discomfort

2. B. Craveri, *La civiltà della conversazione*, Adelphi, Milan 2001.

gave way to more wide-reaching forms of communication. Educational and scientific pathways on a par with those of men were expressly claimed and legitimized. From the intimate writing of journals and travel diaries to political protest; posters and pamphlets were drawn up by women who stridently declaimed their right to speak in assemblies and the need for gender equality through education.

The cultural space that women wanted to conquer seemed restricted for the time, and in some cases, it differed both in terms of geographical affiliation and boundaries delimited by class, religious faith and social standing. Unvarying, however, appeared the desire to be present, to count, to be heard. This desire for protagonism was sometimes expressed in a manner that today seems naïve and amateurish. Nonetheless, it represented the germination of a movement that would ultimately be able to find ways and tools for wresting the dignity and legitimacy that had been denied for too long. The universal light of reason, equal for men and women alike, would not be slow to yield fruit.

Antonella Cagnolati

Writing the silence

Self-censorship and restraint in women's communication

by Aitana Finestrat

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Silence, by definition, is the absence of sound; but also “being silent” can refer to an action – voluntary or not – by which news or words are not conveyed. Therefore, silence is an antonym of communication. How can, then, we interpret the oxymoron in the title? The explanation is quite simple: sometimes a person wants to communicate information that is not correct, morally accepted, appropriate, or it's simply dangerous, so they must resort to strategies that reveal that piece of repressed information. What follows is that we can often find in written communication direct references to explicit or implicit silences. In order to decipher them, it is necessary to understand the temporal geographical and personal context of the writer.

For women in 16th Century Christian Europe (and throughout the 17th Century), long distance communication was not easy. First of all, they encountered practical issues, everyday problems such as the lack of a reliable postal system, unprofessional postmen, or the great insecurity of the roads. Sometimes, they simply lacked the essential skills to put their words in writing due to general low (female) liter-

acy rates. As a result, they had to resort to public or private amanuensis – according to their economic level – who did not guarantee confidentiality.

However, the most significant obstacles were the theoretical and moral issues. Indeed, they had to face numerous difficulties that contributed to the fact that their thoughts could not always be expressed in writing. The era of religious reforms, like many others in history, was not one that encouraged free thought. The control of thought and actions by official institutions (generally of a religious kind) were commonplace at the time of the European “confessionalization”¹. This surveillance was kept with much more severity on women, symbols of virtue, whose attitudes, words, and behaviours were firmly monitored and scrutinized with the prospect of uncovering suspicious behaviours.

1. Education in silence

It is necessary to highlight the importance of Christian upbringing, which educated women in verbal and emotional restraint, sought their control through submission, and guided their consciences with humiliation. Not surprisingly, chastity, prudence and humility were three of the values most repeatedly used to describe the virtuous woman. The virtue of humility received special attention, a quality on which numerous works and writings insisted, always highlighted above others. San Agustín, Luis de Granada, Thomas

1. A. Arcuri, *Confesionalización y disciplinamiento social: dos paradigmas para la Historia Moderna*, in «Hispania Sacra», LXXI (2019), pp. 113-129.

à Kempis or Francisco de Osuna, among others, insisted on the importance of this virtue².

In this regard, women who had the opportunity to write texts meant for the public eye, often had to resort to the so-called “rhetoric of humility” in order to reduce the possibilities of accusation or reprisals³. In her analysis of Santa Teresa’s texts, Alison Weber⁴ highlights her use of a series of discursive rhetorical strategies referred to under the umbrella term “rhetoric of femininity”, which includes, among others, an excessive use of expressions of humility. Accordingly, as Teresa Ferrer also pointed out, the exaggeration of humility in texts written by women transcends the limits of the literary topic to become a “social requirement for women”⁵.

Hence, it is easy to understand that a large part of texts of 16th Century women include this type of construction, which can be a complex mixture resulting from their Christian education – in which they internalize this idea of feminine inferiority –, discursive self-censorship, and the respect and fear of God and his representatives on Earth.

2. See A. Weber, *The paradoxes of humility: Santa Teresa’s Libro de la Vida as double bind*, in «Journal of Hispanic Philology», vol. IX, n. 3 (1985), pp. 211-230. A. Rosillo Luque, *El monasterio de Santa Clara de Manresa (s. XIV-XVII). Las clarisas en la Cataluña central*, doctoral thesis, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona 2016. A. Finestrat, *Jugando a ser mujer. Mujeres religiosas a través de sus cartas después de Trento*, in J. Paniagua, D. Testi, C. Amerlinck (eds), *Hortus Conclusus. El monacato femenino en el mundo ibérico*, Instituto de Humanismo y Tradición Clásica, León 2021, pp. 33-54.

3. P. Matheson, *Breaking the silence: Women, Censorship, and the Reformation*, in «The Sixteenth Century Journal», vol. 27, n. 1 (1996), pp. 97-109.

4. A. Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 1996.

5. T. Ferrer Valls, *La ruptura del silencio: mujeres dramaturgas en el siglo XVII*, in S. Mattalía, M. Aleza (eds), *Mujeres: escrituras y lenguajes (en la cultura Latinoamericana y Española)*, Universitat de València, València 1995, pp. 91-108.

Acting in a way to embody humility was obviously incompatible with the development and demonstration of knowledge or, evidently, with public teaching⁶. During the Early Modern period, women were generally denied access to formal education and could not attend universities. Indeed, they oftentimes barely managed to acquire the basic skills of reading and writing (if their status allowed it). Thus, both formal education and teaching were generally out of their reach⁷. This lack of opportunities for intellectual development was justified, among other things, by Biblical passages, common to Catholics and Protestants. Especially some passages of the Pauline epistles.

The prohibition of women to pursue a teaching profession was justified by a usually cited text from Paul to the Corinthians 14, 34-35: “34 Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. 35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church”.

6. In places like England, sometimes women could get some income from teaching children, often their neighbours, basic skills like reading. They were generally tolerated by the ecclesiastical visitors. See: E. Hubbard, *Reading, Writing, and Initialing: Female Literacy in Early Modern London*, in «Journal of British Studies», vol. 54, n. 3 (2015), p. 553.

7. Women literacy rates for the Early Modern period have been discussed in several scientific works showcasing a variety of theories that usually agree on stating the difficulties of women to access education. Nevertheless, recent studies suggest that there were more women capable of – at least – reading than historians initially thought (especially in major urban spaces). See, for example, Eleanor Hubbard study for women in Early Modern London: *Reading, Writing, and Initialing: Female Literacy in Early Modern London*, in «Journal of British Studies», vol. 54, n. 3 (2015), pp. 553-577.

On the other hand, the obligation of women to keep silence could be read especially in Timothy 2, 11-12: “11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet”.

Both texts explained the silence to which women must have been submitted, but also highlighted and insisted on their submission to men (usually their husbands), emphasising their inferiority. As Antonella Cagnolati stated, the Pauline epistles placed women on a subordinate level, in which the moral values of modesty, obedience and silence stood out above all else⁸.

On the other hand, even though women who joined the Reformation could have had more access to public teaching due to Luther's theories on the universal priesthood, the truth is that the idea of free interpretation of the word of God essentially referred to men. Women were generally left out of the assertion. However, unlike Catholics, oftentimes, pious readings were allowed and even recommended among protestant women. They were also encouraged to devote a few moments of their day to spiritual meditations on what they had learned about the word of God.

In some places, the critical role of women, especially the elderly, in transmitting the Christian values to their descendants was even beginning to be considered thanks to the interpretation of some Biblical passages. For example, another text from the Pauline epistles somehow authorized Anglican women to do so⁹. The text is a letter to Titus 2

8. A. Cagnolati, *Un debate sobre la identidad femenina en el renacimiento*, in «Cuadernos Kóre», n. 3 (2010), pp. 15-16.

9. M.^a L. Candau Chacón, *La religiosidad en la Edad Moderna*, Síntesis, Madrid 2020, p. 272.

verses 3-5: “3 Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. 4 Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God”.

The role of women in the transmission of values is best illustrated in the texts of Lady Grace Mildmay (1552-1620), who left a series of spiritual meditations for the education of her daughter and grandchildren, as well as a brief account of her life¹⁰. In her autobiography, Lady Grace explains that, despite having a governess (Mrs. Hamblyn), she had received her religious education mainly from her mother (Lady Anne Sharington), who had showed her the proper spiritual readings and taught her to meditate about the word of God¹¹. Similarly, she was then in charge of passing on her knowledge to her descendants, and she justified it with another reference from Paul to Timothy in which it was explained how his faith had been passed on through his mother and

10. Lady Grace Mildmay texts were mostly edited in 1993 by Linda Pollock. In addition to an exhaustive introductory study, the edition includes Lady Grace's autobiography, some of her spiritual meditations and medical texts, proof of her vast knowledge of medicine (physics) and pharmacy.

11. “My reverend mother Lady Sharington, [...] was as an angel of God unto me when she first put me in mind of Christ Jesus and examined me in my tender age what were my thoughts when I was alone. And therewithall, instructed me continually, when I was alone to remember God, to call upon him. And to exercise my mind in divine and heavenly meditations which might draw me to be in love with Christ Jesus and to despise this world. She taught me also her meditations and prayers by heart and how I should fear and worship God in spirit and truth”. In L.A. Pollock, *With faith and physic: the life of a Tudor gentlewoman, Lady Grace Mildmay, 1552-1620*, Collins & Brown, London 1993, p. 28.

grandmother¹². In addition to the matrilineal transmission of knowledge explained by Mildmay, she also highlights her religious upbringing, based on submission and self-restraint. She emphasizes that women should always learn in silence, without ever undermining the power or authority of men: “Let women learn with silence, with all subjection. Let not a woman teach, neither usurp authority over the man, but be silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and was in the transgression”¹³.

However, despite the general prohibition against women, who were not allowed to teach, the evident crisis of the Christian Church in the 16th Century led many to wonder if, given the emergency of the situation, women should participate in the disputes and public defence of the faith. Thus, some authors have described the actions of some women of the time as a kind of state-of-emergency feminism. This theory has been explored by Alison Weber¹⁴, when writing about the public actions and thoughts of Ana de San Bartolomé (1549-1626), or Peter Matheson¹⁵ discussing about the publications of Argula von Grumbach (1492-ca. 1554 /1564).

12. 2 Timothy 1, 5: “5 I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also”.

13. L.A. Pollock (1993), *With faith and physic...*, cit., p. 45.

14. A. Weber, *El feminismo parcial de Ana de San Bartolomé*, in L. Vollendorf (ed.), *Literatura y feminismo en España (s. XV-XXI)*, Icaria, Madrid 2005, pp. 77-94 and A. Weber, *Literature by Women Religious in Early Modern Catholic Europe and the New World*, in A.M. Poska, J. Couchman, K.A. McIver (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Routledge, London and New York 2013, pp. 33-51.

15. P. Matheson, *Breaking the silence: Women, Censorship, and the Reformation*, in «The Sixteenth Century Journal», vol. 27, n. 1 (1996), pp. 97-109.