

COURSE OUTLINE/ PHIL 642 SEMINAR IN FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Topic: Equality and Superiority in the 17th C.

Winter term 2020: T 12:30 – 14:30

Leacock 927

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In sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe the *querelle des femmes*, a long-running debate about the nature and worth of women, generated a number of polemical treatises and philosophical dialogues arguing for the superiority of women, many in Italian. The superiority of the sex was sometimes said to be founded on the superiority of a women's soul, but more often on certain features of her body or physiology. Such arguments drew heavily, directly and indirectly, on ancient philosophy, especially the works of Aristotle and Plato. Moreover, in these works the conception of the soul and of human reason, and the understanding of the interaction of soul and body can be traced to ancient sources. The puzzle that we will be addressing concerns the aim of these arguments, given that pro-woman works of the time always begin with an assertion of the identity of the rational soul in men and women, and hence an a priori claim of equality. The question is not so much how to reconcile the equality claims with the superiority claims (although we might wonder about that), but how to understand their aims and their relation to one another. To answer that question we will consider, by way of contrast, works by two seventeenth century French philosophers, Marie de Gournay and François Poulain de la Barre, who argued for the equality of the sexes. While de Gournay seems to retain the Aristotelian framework that characterizes the arguments of those arguing for the superiority of women, Poulain de la Barre situates himself as a Cartesian, with a different understanding of soul, body, and the relation between them. The theme that we will be pursuing throughout the course is the way in which conceptions of the human person and of sexual differences affect arguments for the equality of the sexes or the superiority of one.

Prerequisites: Students in this course should have taken at least two courses in the history of philosophy; ideally a course in ancient and in early modern.

Texts: Two books will be available from the Word Bookstore, 469 Milton Street: Lucrezia Marinella's *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. & trans. Anne Dunhill (Chicago 1999), and *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the 17th Century*, ed. & trans. Desmond M. Clarke (OUP 2013). Other readings will be made available on MyCourses.

Course Requirements: weekly discussion questions (10%); one presentation to the class (10%); a write-up of the presentation (30%); one term paper (50%). Discussion questions should be submitted no later than the Sunday preceding class at 12:00 midnight on MyCourses; they should be re-submitted, collected in a single file, at the end of the course for evaluation. Students are advised to save electronic versions of all their work. You are expected to have read the assigned material before each class (consult the syllabus for weekly readings).

Grading criteria: To do excellent work in this course, you need to be able to do more than reiterate the readings or what was said in class. An "A" indicates that you not only understand the material, but that you have also thought critically about it, grasping at least some of its subtleties and implications. A "B" reflects an above-average understanding of the material without any major errors; "B" work does not capture the complexity of the issues. A "C" suggests a struggle with the material that results in basic comprehension but is flawed by some significant misunderstandings or errors. A "D" indicates only a rudimentary comprehension of part of the material with most of the material being misunderstood. An "F" indicates no understanding either of the assignment or of the material.

Policy on extensions:

No extensions will be granted without an appropriate medical note. Late work will be penalized at the rate of a third of a grade per calendar day past the due date. For example, a paper that is evaluated as a B, if one day late, will be assigned a grade of B-; the same paper, if two days late, would receive a C+.

Required syllabus statements:

McGill University values academic integrity. All students must, therefore, understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change