

# SLAVERY AND SERVITUDE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FEMINISM

Arcangela Tarabotti and Gabrielle Suchon

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In the preface to the third edition of her *Reflections on Marriage* (1706), Mary Astell famously asks: “If all men are Born Free, how is it that all women are born slaves?” (1996: 18). When she insists that women at the mercy of their husbands endure “the perfect Condition of Slavery,” Astell does not appear to take notice of those in her midst who work as domestic servants or of the enslaved people in the Americas and the Caribbean (Perry 1986: 8). The representation of the husband-wife relationship as analogous to the master-slave relationship proved popular and persistent into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the cultures and idioms of feminism and abolitionism became intertwined in the late eighteenth century, the slavery to which women’s subjection was increasingly compared included the racial domination of Africans in the colonies. The analogy to racial, colonial slavery was sometimes predicated on deep or willful misunderstandings of the treatment to which slaves were exposed. Moreover, it obscured the experiences of Black women subjected to chattel slavery with their own complex relationships to marriage regulations (e.g., Mill 2006).

According to historian Karen Offen, the

symbolic connection between women’s status and slavery in French language, culture, and politics... can be traced... back to the mid-seventeenth century, well before the slavery of blacks from Africa in the French colonies had even become subject to public discussion.

(2008: 59)

The symbolic analogy between the domination of women and slaves or servants was made by European feminist and pro-woman writers advocating for the liberation of women from the oppressive aspects of social roles, such as marriage or religious service, anathema to their moral and intellectual development. While servants and enslaved women were typically worse off, non-working class, early modern European women were strictly subordinated to men and the needs of their families. They had few legal and social protections from sexual and physical abuse, or from having their resources squandered by fathers, brothers, or husbands. They were moved about, subject to different authorities, with little regard for how they understood their own interests and welfare. They were discouraged from study, writing, and even speaking (Wiesner-Hanks 2019). Nevertheless, analogies between the subjection of white, European women and the experience of the enslaved are equivocal and problematic. If Offen is correct that racial slavery was not the paradigm such writers had in mind, what did they mean by slavery and servitude? How did

ideas of slavery function in their analyses and complaints? Why did they reach for this idiom to advance their causes?

This chapter considers two of the earliest known, philosophically supported calls for emancipation from gender subordination written by women. Arcangela Tarabotti's *Paternal Tyranny*, published posthumously in 1654, is described as "the first manifesto about women's inalienable rights to liberty, equality, and universal education" (Panizza 2004: 1). And Gabrielle Suchon (1632–1703) is acknowledged as "the first female philosopher to have left a substantial body of work devoted solely to the subject of women" (Stanton and Wilkin 2010: 1). Although their contexts and lives were somewhat different, both Tarabotti and Suchon were separated from their families and confined against their wills to convents by the time they were 13.<sup>1</sup> Due to the expense of marriage dowries, it was common practice in early modern Venice to select some daughters, especially those less likely to make a marriage advantageous for the family, for life in the cloister. And when a family suffered financial misfortune, such as when Suchon's father died, daughters might have found themselves suddenly delivered to lifelong religious service. Exiled from the family home and enclosed within a highly regimented, institution for girls and women, both Tarabotti and Suchon dedicated themselves to advocating for the emancipation of their sex. Both frequently employ the idiom of slavery to signal the intensity of their complaint and to revalue the destinies chosen for women of their class.

In this contribution, I will show how the language of servitude plays a distinctive role in their writing, the examination of which locates them in wider traditions of moral and political thought and helps us to understand their complaints. They adapt familiar and widely understood concepts of slavery to feminist purposes. In particular, they draw upon ideas of "moral slavery," prominent in ancient and Stoic philosophy, as well as in scripture and Roman literature. This notion of slavery refers to being controlled by external forces, alien or hostile to one's "nature" as a human being. They likewise draw upon the idea of "political slavery" articulated in classical republican thought, which refers to being controlled by an arbitrary will, indifferent or contrary to the welfare and interests of those who are subject to it. In addition, they both emphasize how forced confinement severs them from their kinship networks. As they describe it, their isolated, religious servitude tears them from the fabric of the social worlds of friendship and family: they are "buried," "hidden," and "forgotten." We can understand their accounts depict a kind of "natal alienation" that contributes to "social death," features that Orlando Patterson identifies as common among diverse institutions and practices of slavery (1982). Being torn from kin, losing one's civil status, and being dispossessed of rights over property or personhood are typically most extreme in cases of chattel slavery, though these kinds of deprivation occur with forms of domination (incarceration, deportation, refugee displacement, some marriages, sex trafficking, etc.). When we reflect upon Tarabotti's and Suchon's complaints about the mortification of their social existence, the accent of their complaint changes in comparison to many male Republican thinkers who frame slavery as, first and foremost, subjection to bad laws and hostile government. Their emphasis on the cost to their relationships and the loss of their places in the hearts and memories of their loved ones brings out a feminist concern with the damage that political domination does to relationships of care, affection, and kinship. Like their male forebears and contemporaries, the language of servitude and slavery is calculated to shock and challenge perceptions and values. They represent gender roles and ways of life that are widely regarded as honorable, noble, and appropriate for girls and women as "servile," coercive, and damaging in order to lay claim to moral and political freedom for their sex. With the idiom of slavery, they insist that women, like their enfranchised male contemporaries, are harmed by domination and are by nature free.

I will proceed by outlining how Tarabotti and Suchon use the language of slavery to describe, analyze, and criticize the domination of women and girls. After reviewing their appropriations of the discourses of moral and political slavery as well as their descriptions of the destruction of

the social lives suffered by those forcefully confined, I will reflect on the status of the language of slavery. Should we regard it as metaphorical or literal? Is it figurative or real? I will conclude with some thoughts about how to take seriously the philosophical, moral, and political language of slavery in the seventeenth century without marginalizing or erasing the contemporaneous rise of the trade in African lives and the proliferation of racial slavery. Such a task is by no means easy, and I have no simple answers to offer. As we have begun to uncover the buried voices of some early modern women, we must strive to acknowledge the invisible presence of servants and slaves that structured and formed their worlds.

### **22.1 Against Nature**

The idea of “moral slavery” draws upon philosophical literature from Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, but only indirectly concerns institutions and practices of enslavement. “Moral slavery” can be understood broadly as subjection to forces – paradigmatically, the passions and false beliefs – that prevent individuals from actualizing those abilities characteristic of their natures. This understanding belongs especially to Platonic and Stoic doctrines that represent being controlled by passions as a kind of slavery (Garnsey 1996). It is part of the human project to strive to master oneself through the exercise of reason and virtue. To do so, one must resist being overwhelmed by irrational and dangerous passions (such as sensual pleasure or love of money and fame) or being led astray by superstitious or deranged doctrines. This kind of slavery is widespread and does not require a human master. Yet, if some people are, by nature, unable to act from their rational powers, as Aristotle maintains, this propensity to be ruled by passions calls for a master, someone to direct the servile person. For Aristotle, natural slaves lack a deliberative faculty and women somehow participate in deliberation without possessing it (Aristotle 2013). Therefore, they do not benefit from certain kinds of education and cannot be entrusted to reason independently. Tarabotti and Suchon address widespread misogynist views – embedded in philosophy, religious culture, and institutions – that understand women to be governed by passions to a greater extent than men. Even if women are not called “slaves,” they may be considered “slavish,” or “servile,” and thereby incapable of freedom, virtue, and human excellence. Suchon and Tarabotti seek to show that the servility and frailty women may exhibit are not expressions of their inferior natures. If women are sometimes, for example, excessively emotional or prone to superstition, it is a result of being inferiorized through subordination. If women exhibit human excellence more rarely than men, it is because girls are only exceptionally permitted to develop their rational natures.

In this section, I will outline how Suchon draws upon this traditional understanding of moral servitude, according to which we are unfree insofar as we are unable to develop the powers characteristic of our natures, and act according to them (2010: 87). Tarabotti relies on a similar notion when she maintains that all humans are born free, naturally love freedom, and consider freedom’s deprivation to be most odious (2004: 79–80). Freedom, in their views, belongs fundamentally to our natures, or essences. Freedom is something toward which we strive by nature, and both Tarabotti and Suchon observe that women, like anyone else, experience its deprivation as a form of violence and deformation.

Appealing to scripture, Tarabotti emphasizes how God gave humanity freedom of the will and the power to choose (2004: 51, 61). Suchon places a heavier accent on our rational natures, insisting that ignorance and whatever interferes with our intellectual development is slavery (2010: 132–35). Even while asserting a metaphysical foundation for freedom, both authors tend to support their arguments in phenomenological terms. Experiences of freedom as joyful and empowering contrast sharply with a life of forced confinement to the convent or to the marital home, in which women and girls are constrained, controlled, and deceived. In the words of Suchon, “We

cannot deny the legitimacy of the passion with which we hate all that both denies our freedom and binds us in constraint.” The regularity, consistency, and intensity of our aversion disclose to us our free natures. Like a stone that falls downward according to the law of gravity, “beings who are dislodged from our rightful place suffer continuous anxiety” (Suchon 2010: 117). For Tarabotti, “Once vows have been made, duty commands their fulfillment.” Yet, those forced into religious service usually find that “the heart is contrary” and “sentiments are not in accord with its own verbal assent and satisfaction” (2004: 81). The natural and robust aversion we have to the deprivation of our freedom discloses to women that we are, like men, born free.

Suchon and Tarabotti do not frame constraint only as something imposed by others. Suchon describes desire as a “tyrant that enslaves and abuses our hearts” (2010: 104). When we are moved, for example, by our desires to possess ephemeral things or to control things outside of our power, “our heart becomes a tempestuous sea agitated by the winds and waves of various emotions” (2010: 105). Passions are not dangerous or enslaving simply because they do not arise from reason. There are passions that animate our intellects and agree with our natures, such as wonder, the pleasures of learning, and the admiration of virtue. Passions enslave us only when they undermine our efforts at self-perfection. Yet, passions that precipitate our bondage, even if they get the best of us, are not masters whose interests are served by our subordination. They are simply tendencies or forces, within or without us, that drive us away from the development of the powers that essentially define us.

The powers that most define the essence of human beings vary for different thinkers. Thus, if discourses of servitude aim to alert us to what prevents us from actualizing our natures, the forces of servitude that discourse picks out reflect a particular picture of human existence. For example, for the Stoics, it is especially important not to be driven by one’s fear of death (e.g., Epictetus 1998). If we allow ourselves to be ruled by our fear of death, we will not prize sufficiently the only true goods, which are internal properties of the soul. It is possible to be physically restrained, tormented, or even owned by another person, while remaining free, since freedom is a moral quality belonging to the soul. It is a power of rational self-control that is indifferent to external circumstances. This reflects an idea of human beings as fundamentally rational and free. To be a sage, however, is rare, demanding, and exceptional. The free and wise are few; the rest are slaves (see Garnsey 1996: Ch. 9).

The Stoic view of human nature only allows for very few to be free, but Descartes universalizes the ideal of self-mastery through the rational education of the will: “There is no soul so weak that it cannot, if well-directed, acquire an absolute power over its passions” (Descartes 1984: 348; *Passions of the Soul*, article 50). For Tarabotti and Suchon, like Descartes, fundamental to human being is the exercise of free will, informed by discerning and cultivated judgment. Women, Tarabotti and Suchon contend, are deprived of intellectual and civic educations that would allow them to prioritize what matters most and to cultivate their self-possession. Their arguments also suggest that external goods, especially education but also the ability to move about freely and determine one’s own social relations, matter a great deal for the exercise of freedom.

Importantly, the notion of slavery to the passions is not reserved for those condemned to a lower social status, or for those deprived of the social support for developing their reason. Tarabotti, for example, insists that men are the greater servants of vice. In her words, “What liars you men are! True strength lies in conquering one’s own passions. Which sex is stronger than the female one in this respect – forever virtuous, resistant to every push and pull of ill-conceived thoughts and desires?” (2004: 47). Tarabotti’s discourse often performs a kind of reversal – typical in ancient literature and scripture – according to which those who enjoy the highest social status are, at the same time, the most (morally) enslaved. Discourses contrasting slavery and freedom often aim to challenge popular values. Classically, orators and philosophers urge readers to see rational self-possession and intellectual perfection as higher goods than sensual enjoyment, fame,

or wealth. They urge contempt toward self-indulgent, violent rulers who are unconcerned with the good of their subjects. The tyrant has power over others but none over himself. He does as he pleases, indulges every lust without regard for the cost to others, and is wholly ignorant of any costs to himself. As Plato writes in the *Republic*, “the real tyrant is, even if he doesn’t seem so to someone, in truth the real slave... he is most in need of the most things and poor in truth” (1968: 579e). In the rhetorical tradition of “anti-tyrannicism,” he who respects only the law of self-gratification is represented as a figure of pathos, a true slave (Nyquist 2013: Chs 1–2). Such a pathetic creature devoid of self-control is an object of disgust, who is nevertheless dangerous. Cicero declares that “the whole of that noxious, sacrilegious breed [tyrants] should be banished from human society.” He compares tyrants to an abscess that must be “excised... from the body of humanity which we all share” (Cicero 2001: 95).

Whereas anti-tyranny discourse typically criticizes rulers for acting like the city is a household, and treating subjects as if they are slaves, Tarabotti draws upon anti-tyranny discourse to defame patriarchal abuse of power within the household. Tarabotti brings a feminist lens to this tradition when she condemns those patriarchs empowered to discard their daughters for base goods that they prize more than their flesh and blood. They confine their young daughters to avoid paying a marriage dowry and thus cherish the indulgence of their lusts more than the souls of their children (Tarabotti 2004: 112). These heads of households, who perpetuate the deception that fragile girls require the protection of (conveniently less expensive) enclosure, are themselves weak. They are playthings of their desires, slaves to sin, unworthy of obedience and respect (see also Suchon 2010: 121).

Of course, women subject to paternal tyranny suffer debilitating passions as well. Whereas Tarabotti emphasizes the venal and craven desires that enslave the hearts of men who hold women in subjection, Suchon declares that, deprived of freedom, women are tormented by their fear and anxiety: “a heart forever in fear, shadowy eyes denied all sorts of light, a soul deprived of tranquility and interior joy, and uncertainty in all things” (2010: 116). We will see below that Tarabotti describes how her forced religious enclosure, which she describes also as dwelling in shadowy unreality, yields harmful passions.

What I aimed to show in this section is that Tarabotti and Suchon represent women as subject to servitude because their circumstances conflict with the development of the powers essential to human being; they are against nature. Naming “external” forces, such as passions and lack of learning, “servitude” or “slavery” insofar as they prevent the realization of human nature is a common feature of classical and early modern philosophical and literary discourse. This notion of “servitude” has only an indirect relationship to chattel slavery. The susceptibility of some to moral slavery was sometimes used to justify legal slavery. And failures of self-mastery are rhetorically contrasted with chattel slavery in, for example, parables that represent tyrants as “more enslaved” than their “lowest” servants (e.g., Plato, *Republic*, Bk. IX). And Stoic literature will insist that a slave can be better and wiser than a free person if they have greater power over their emotions, and a firmer grasp of those internal goods that matter most. The idea of moral slavery is distinct from legal slavery yet intertwined with it. Moral slavery is a longstanding philosophical, political, and literary trope that we can analyze. These feminist texts draw upon these figurative and polemical representations of slavery and servitude, but with a distinct objective. Rather than heralding the virtues of the “wise man” in contrast to the many fools, and rather than urging everyone to self-mastery through esteeming only what depends on us, they challenge popular conceptions of what a good life for women should look like. Establishing that women’s natures are not served – but are in fact opposed – by constraint and confinement grounds their more confrontational claims about male domination. They maintain that women are stunted, unfulfilled, and violated by being forcibly confined, uneducated, or yoked for life to a husband, which allows them to conclude that women are subject to arbitrary rule, or political slavery.

## 22.2 Arbitrary Rule

In the early modern period, influenced by the works of Roman moralists and classical republicans, the term “slavery” was widely used to refer to objectionable forms of political rule. Drawing on Aristotle (often via Cicero), political power would be accused of instituting slavery if rulers organized the commonwealth to serve themselves rather than their subjects (Aristotle 2013: 1259a19–23). A state could be free if and only if, to invoke Cicero’s motto, “the people’s welfare is the highest law” (1999). Whereas moral slavery entails being subject to haphazard, aimless forces and thereby diverted from one’s good, political slavery names a kind of rule that benefits another. Tyrants, patriarchs, and masters might be governed by their own arbitrary passions as much as, if not more than, those they rule. Yet, political slavery names a relationship of domination: it is subjection to an arbitrary and hostile will, constrained to serve another rather than oneself.

Julie Walsh argues that Suchon defends a republican conception of liberty according to which freedom requires “non-domination” (2019: 7–8). In the republican tradition, freedom is compatible with constraint and interference – such as laws, parental discipline, or community codes – just as long as such compulsion aims at the good of the one who is commanded. Yet, it is not sufficient for laws merely to be compatible with the interests of the ruled. Popular welfare must be the purpose of the commands, and there must be ways of holding rulers accountable to realizing that aim. Suchon defends women’s participation in the business of ruling, which would allow women to articulate and defend their interests for themselves. In addition to requiring consultation of those affected, political liberty must respect objective features of human existence. For Suchon, non-dominating and non-arbitrary rule must provide the means for subjects to cultivate their mental powers, and thereby actualize their rational natures.

Tarabotti wavered between naming her tract *Paternal Tyranny or Innocence Deceived*. It was first published under the title *Innocence Deceived*, which scholars suspect was an effort to reduce the emphasis upon the agency of fathers and others who confine women for self-interested reasons (Weaver 2016: 284). The centrality of her concern with deception suggests that Tarabotti objected strongly to the epistemic and cognitive harms of domination. The “arbitrariness” of arbitrary rule points both to the caprice of the dominating will and to the arbitrary lies, stories, and misogynist ideologies that conceal from girls (and maybe from the liars themselves) the real motives for their confinement. In response to the notion that confinement serves to protect women’s chastity, Tarabotti replies: “this does not justify the arbitrary authority of cruel men to dispose of thousands of innocent lives at whim by thrusting them into prisons and barbarically sacrificing them to Pluto” (2004: 54). Paternal tyranny acts upon girls and women to serve the interests of men in power, while damaging the welfare of girls and women. Their welfare includes the satisfaction of their desire to know and understand. It harms their native desire for knowledge to be deceived and cajoled into permanent, forced service to religion.

Marguerite Deslauriers, in her analysis of Venetian feminists including Tarabotti, locates them in the republican tradition. She outlines how they object to male domination as both (i) the imposition of external, arbitrary control and (ii) as a usurpation of their power of self-government. Deslauriers maintains that “While Tarabotti is most famous for her criticism of the forced confinement of women religious, her arguments aim more generally to demonstrate the injustice of requiring women to submit to the decisions of husbands and fathers” (2019: 731). Aligned with Walsh’s interpretation of Suchon, Deslauriers determines that patriarchal power is dominating because its source is an alien will, and because that will is itself governed by arbitrary “whim.” The imposition of external authority is contrary to their natures, not only because the decisions condemn women to an excruciating and miserable situation. This imposition also denies women their divinely endowed power to exercise their free will, and thus prevents them from educating and governing themselves.



In an article on Tarabotti, Elissa Weaver also assures her reader that *Paternal Tyranny* is “much more than a complaint against enforced confinement.” It is “a complaint against the source of the misogynist belief in women’s inferiority, inconstancy, and intellectual weakness” (2016: 282). Nevertheless, I would like to dwell briefly upon Suchon’s and Tarabotti’s descriptions of the devastating consequences of their enforced confinement. Attention to how they describe these effects contributes to our understanding of what was so vicious about the domination they experienced. The systematic confinement of young girls such as Tarabotti and Suchon, especially at such an early age (before “the age of reason”), is an instance of severe political domination. Neither Suchon nor Tarabotti object to a life of enclosure for those women who feel a calling to pursue a religious vocation and devote themselves to service as an expression of their faith. They object to being compelled or lured through deception into irrevocable enclosure.

Tarabotti and Suchon both describe women’s subjection as a kind of “social death.” It is striking how often both Tarabotti and Suchon use the language and imagery of death to describe their own situations. Tarabotti and Suchon point to how confinement precipitates the loss of civil personhood and their claims to property. At least as devastating, is the loss of those kinship and social relations that give life its vitality and meaning. In both marriage and the cloister, women lose their possessions (or their control over them); their ability to move about is further restricted; the opportunities to engage in activities they choose, such as learning, contract; and, they lack jurisdiction over their own bodies. For women of means like Suchon and Tarabotti, both the convent and marriage increase their constraint; they provoke a loss, a death of personhood. Even for women of the more powerful classes, their status is not sufficient to guard them against the greatest violations. Tarabotti decries how it is “legal to kill [wives] on the slightest suspicion” of infidelity, while husbands can commit any vile act with impunity (2004: 111). The form of domination a girl or woman of their class endures is typically determined by the fortune of their families and the decisions of their fathers or brothers. It is then enforced by culture, the law, and the institutions to which they are delivered.

In addition to the legal erasure and the contraction of their freedom to move about and to dispose of their property, there are devastating psychological and epistemic consequences of exclusion. Enclosed girls are severed from the fabric of the family life that they have so far known. If they enjoyed it before, they no longer have the possibility of quotidian affection, games, and duties that texture life in a household. They are, in the words of our authors, “forgotten,” “inaudible,” “hidden,” and “buried.” It becomes difficult for them to express themselves, to speak, or to be believed. They both speculate that they are lost to the memories and affections of their loved ones. They describe their experience as one of radical isolation and imprisonment, which renders them “unreal” and their existence “shadowy.” Physical, psychological, and epistemic isolation profoundly damages one’s social being and interferes with the intersubjective co-constitution of reality that typically characterizes human life (Guenther 2013).

Tarabotti portrays forced confinement as a living death, even soul murder. She says it again and again: “you bury the women you brought into the light, entombing them alive” (2004: 83); “buried alive...their still breathing corpses in coarsely woven rags among a thousand never-dying deaths” (92); “shut up”; “buried”; unable to look “up at the sky” (100). Clothed in “funereal garments” and dead to the world (90), daughters endure a “live burial in hell’s raging jaws” (117). Tarabotti’s heartbreaking cries testify to the experience of being excised, discarded, cut off. She compares patriarchal confinement of daughters to Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, pointing to the distinctive harm of destroying one’s own kin and disregarding any special obligation to them. She describes herself as caged, muted, unable to see the limitless horizon of the sky. She is shrouded in darkness, bereft and alone.

Suchon’s discourse is considerably more tempered than the anguished despair of Tarabotti, yet she conveys a similar desolation in an elegy. There, she represents the “unhappy sex” as “Deprived

of freedom and subservient, too/ Perpetually scorned and in darkness so deep.” She suggests that men profess their love but do not seek the happiness of girls and women. They use tender words to “snuff their memory/ Consigning them cruelly to obscurity... They would have women’s minds still buried/ Mired in dirty dust” (2010: 227).

Domination imposes upon women a form of what Patterson, in his monumental study of slavery, calls “social death.” Although his aim is to identify the distinctive features of concrete practices of slavery throughout history, Patterson’s analysis of social death provides rich insights into a range of social and political practices that target the social life of a person for erosion or destruction. Patterson describes how a slave, by definition, lacks civil status. Slavery, especially in war or incarceration, is often a substitute for death. Instead of being killed in war, for example, the victor suspends the death sentence of the vanquished and uses him, or (more often) his wife and children, as he wishes. They are legally and morally killable, and thus they can be enslaved. Their rights have been forfeited through martial aggression or crime; their social claims die. Slavery produces social death in various other ways, too. It isolates people from their natal groups and severs their ties to the languages and traditions of their ancestors (1982).

Tarabotti and Suchon both report feeling as though they have disappeared. They feel inaudible, invisible, and unbelievable. It is not only that they are hidden from the world, but that they see very little themselves. “Deprived as she is of looking up at the sky,” she cannot enjoy either the beauty of nature or a plurality of human relationships. She is enclosed with others, dressed identically, subject to the same rules, and reciting the same prayers. Domination interferes with the development of their human capabilities not only through denying girls an intellectual and civic education. It erodes the social character of their being. Forced confinement severely curtails the ability to determine character of their relationships, and it deprives them of the social and kinship ties that give human life meaning. One of the most persistent features of feminism is its protest against the traditional place of women and girls in the household. Tarabotti and Suchon testify as well to the crushing harm of being abandoned and separated from their families. In addition to protesting the harms of exclusion from legal rights and recognition, feminist voices denounce the cruel destruction of our relationships of care and kinship.

Tarabotti and Suchon, as I have outlined, both draw upon the idea of political slavery. Typically, political slavery refers to the unchecked power of a tyrant or a foreign nation over “free men.” In the words of Mary Nyquist, “vituperation against political slavery protests a generalized assault on the citizenry’s dignity or the humiliating loss of honor entailed in the reduction of status from ‘free’ to ‘slave’” (2013: 6). It highlights the disgraceful injustice of subordinating those who ought to be free to the capricious demands of vulgar, “beastly,” vicious rulers. Classically, it is a masculine discourse that stigmatizes servility as animal, lowly, and feminine.<sup>2</sup> It exhorts men to fight for independence from monarchical or foreign rule and bring honor to themselves and their country (Nyquist 2013: 49–53). Tarabotti and Suchon subvert this discourse by representing women as rightfully free and thus as debased by their domination. By declaring their domination to be a form of slavery, they lay claim to freedom.

Whereas their male republican contemporaries were concerned primarily to defame monarchy, promote civic participation, and defend the popular welfare against elites, Tarabotti and Suchon dedicate themselves to highlighting the moral, psychological, and physical damage domination wreaked upon their social being. They emphasize the profound harm of isolation and natal alienation, describing their experience as a kind of death. Instead of enjoying eternal life, promised by righteousness and service to Christ (The Holy Bible: Romans. 6:22), they experience mortification, darkness, and “hell’s abyss” (Tarabotti 2004: 58). They want to be seen, heard, and remembered. They oppose being buried, hidden, forgotten, and smothered. They yearn to be related and bound to others, able to develop their intellectual and moral powers in families



and communities aimed at the good of everyone. With their invocation of classical republican discourse, they declare that, like “free men,” girls and women should not be mere servants of the good of their families, the city, or religious orders, especially when those social and political bodies aim only at their own advantage. So, while they subvert and expand a traditionally masculine political discourse of political slavery, how should we understand the relationship of their protest to chattel slavery?

### 22.3 Slavery as Reality or Metaphor?

At a time when there is greater reckoning with the legacy of transatlantic slavery and racial domination, we are confronted with the need to make sense of the relationship between chattel slavery and early modern discourses that describe various kinds of oppression suffered by white Europeans as “slavery.” Some scholars stipulate that the language of slavery among early modern pro-woman and feminist writers ought to be understood as “metaphorical,” as an instance of poetic license. Ruth Perry, for example, says of Mary Astell that she “used the word ‘slavery’ strictly as a metaphor when bemoaning the plight of women” (1986: 8). In contrast, when a character in Moderata Fonte’s sixteenth-century feminist dialogue declares that men treat women like slaves, Marguerite Deslauriers remarks: “This is not a figure of speech.” Deslauriers cites the complaint of another character in the dialogue who is describing the deprivation that marriage imposes: “when a woman marries she ‘loses her liberty and [...] her control over her property, surrendering all she has to the man who bought her’” (2019: 723). Deslauriers thus suggests that the treatment of women as property, as things to be “bought,” and as subject to the capricious control of the head of household (technically, the “despot”) should be understood as real rather than figurative. How should we understand the relationship between the idiom of slavery and the reality of gender domination? How do we take seriously the descriptions of early European feminists without obscuring the very different reality of racial slavery?

Let us consider these two, contrary impulses. For some critics, early modern women can only metaphorically be called “slaves” or “like slaves.” For others, the early modern writers meant this sincerely, approximating or analogizing the situation of women to that of slaves. My own hypothesis with respect to the metaphorical status of the language of “slavery” is complex (and, I confess, ambivalent). Early modern, European daughters of enfranchised men were not literally enslaved. Most women of this class were barred from participation in intellectual and civic life, married off or conscripted to religious service without consultation, and usually lacked the standing to demand redress for even extreme abuse. They may have been beaten, killed, imprisoned temporarily or long-term in their homes or in convents. They were often (but not always) unable to control the resources they inherited. The subjects of seventeenth-century feminist and pro-woman writing did not bear the legal or social status of slaves, and there are more dissimilarities than similarities between their quotidian experience and that of enslaved people in the colonies. Even if they were really dominated, they were “enslaved” only metaphorically. Nevertheless, I have tried to show that the seventeenth-century metaphorical use of the word “slavery” is not casual, ornamental, or even imprecise.

Metaphor, for Aristotle, involves a departure from ordinary language that applies the name of one thing to a different thing (Hawkes 2017: 7). Yet, metaphor is not necessarily fanciful. Metaphor (and analogy, which is, for Aristotle, a species of metaphor) can evince a power of grasping resemblances and making them perceptible to others. It is an unexpected use of language that, by disrupting our habits of association, provokes new patterns of thinking: “strange words simply puzzle us; ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh” (Aristotle 1877: 1410b). Referring to early modern, European

women of (at least moderate) means as subject to “servitude” unsettles the typical association of “slave” with a rightless person, who “despite being human... is a piece of property” (Aristotle 2013: 1254a). Applying the name “servant” or “slave” to the wives and daughters of free men interferes with other ways of understanding the place of girls and women in middle- and upper-class European family or society. Early feminism, as we find in the writings of Tarabotti and Suchon, carries properties from the institution and experience of slavery over to the situation of the women of their class. It is a deliberately disturbing gesture, designed to produce a new meaning, or a new set of associations (Hawkes 2017: 1–2), and thereby provoke a new evaluation of their situation.

Some critics bluntly contrast the metaphorical to the real. Susan Buck-Morss, for example, refers to the “real” slavery of stolen African people in the colonies in contrast to the “metaphorical” slavery of the philosophers. The “slavery” of, for example, England to Spain, the object of John Locke’s bitter complaints, is “metaphor for legal tyranny” with no meaningful relationship to institutions and practices of slavery (Buck-Morss 2009: 28). Buck-Morss is correct to reject the conflation of legal tyranny and chattel slavery. The real/ metaphorical distinction, however, discourages us from understanding the precise relationship between discourses of political slavery and the realities of legal slavery.<sup>3</sup> Republican discourses appealed to the definition of slavery in the *Justinian’s Digest*: “Slavery is an institution of the *ius gentium* (law of all peoples) whereby, contrary to nature, one person is subject to the control of another” (1.5.4.1). The concept of political slavery, as it is used by early modern republicans drawing on thinkers such as Cicero or Machiavelli, relies on the established legal language of slavery, even as they apply this definition analogically to forms of political rule. In addition to the legal definition, classical republicans draw upon representations of slavery from literary history and philosophy to develop models of the unacceptable, unjust, and devastating negation of freedom.

Even if we might find the analogy problematic or even abusive today, I do not think the “metaphorical” or analogical slavery of political domination is an empty signifier. The term has a technical and precise meaning, with reference to actual institutions and effects of slavery. The idea of political slavery appeals to analogy to identify how individuals, groups, or nations can stand in relationship to an arbitrary power in a similar way to how a slave stands in relationship to a master, or *dominus*. To use analogy (a kind of metaphor commonly used in philosophical discourse) is not to say that a subject of early modern England or a girl forcibly confined for life to a convent is in an identical situation to someone subject to chattel slavery. It is to identify shared properties in the relationships of two kinds of domination. It highlights what is intolerable in the relationship between two kinds of subjects and two kinds of socially authorized, yet uncontrolled power.

Even if we accept, as I do, that the idea of slavery draws out the contours of unfreedom in an illuminating way, we may still worry that these discourses instrumentalize the experience of enslaved people to illuminate what is bad, wrong, and intolerable about the domination of non-enslaved people. Highlighting the misery and objectionable character of slavery could and should stress why *no one* should ever be subject to such a “vile and miserable estate” (Locke 1988: 141). Historically, however, it has often not done so. Thus, the use of slavery as a metaphor and a model to identify and object to domination is a fraught, morally ambiguous enterprise. A foundational metaphor of western political thought since the ancients, it was eventually seized upon by feminist thinkers at least since the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was also re-deployed by abolitionists and writers who endured chattel slavery (see, e.g., Rogers 2020). Thus, I think we can acknowledge that early modern thinkers articulate their complaints by appealing to metaphorical and analogical notions of slavery and servitude, but without treating this moral and political idiom, in the words of Cicero, “decorous,” vague, or meaningless.

## 22.4 Conclusion

While I have only begun to explore Tarabotti's and Suchon's discourses on servitude, I sought to show that their discourses of servitude grow out of particular traditions in moral and political thought. At the same time, they transform the objectives and emphases of these traditional notions through their distinctively feminist perspectives. They both object to how members of their sex are prevented from developing their natures, the powers characteristic of human being. They characterize forced confinement as a form of political slavery, in which girls and women are controlled and deprived for the advantage of fathers or households. They likewise decry how enclosure poisons and deranges bonds of kinship. Tarabotti and Suchon communicate their experience of being buried, hidden, inaudible, and erased from memory. Because they lose their social ties, life itself loses its texture, color, and reality. It is "mired in dust." Tarabotti and Suchon, however, do not make the logical step from their conviction that slavery is anathema to human existence to advocating expressly for slaves and servants.

In conclusion, let us briefly consider who the slaves are to which they compare themselves. Tarabotti alludes to Biblical slavery when comparing fathers to the Pharaoh (2004: 72). She points out Plato's good fortune to be born a Greek rather than a slave (79). She bitterly and sarcastically suggests that the dowry system might make more sense if, rather than family resources being consumed to buy a master for a daughter, a man were "to pay out money when taking a wife, just as you do in purchasing slaves" (95). With these rather different examples, Tarabotti does not seem to have a particular model of slavery in mind. The word "slavery," first and foremost, signals a fierce complaint. In classical republican discourse on political slavery, in contrast to moral discourse, masters are represented unfavorably, as greedy, heartless, and sinful. While one ought to aspire for self-mastery morally speaking, enslaving those who are by nature free is dishonorable and loathsome. She draws freely on different images of slavery to insist that forced confinement is a devastating form of domination, and to assault the esteem enjoyed by patriarchal authority. Her text is a specific, targeted intervention. She does not observe the plight of servants or enslaved people, let alone join them to her anguished cry for freedom.

Suchon also refers to various institutions and practices of slavery, but she directly refers to the traffic in human beings.

Although the name 'slave' refers particularly to those who in the past were trafficked throughout the world, and still today in the Indies, Turkey, and other places, it still includes all people, who by misfortune of their condition or their conduct, find themselves entangled in the same miseries and calamities.

(1693: 1.4.21)<sup>4</sup>

While acknowledging that "slave," strictly speaking, refers to those who are bought, sold, and traded, either due to misfortune or as punishment for a crime, she suggests that those who suffer the same miseries are also included in the definition. She does not call for an end to the institution of slavery, which she acknowledges to be ongoing, and we may doubt the justice of extending the scope of reference for the name "slave" exactly as she does. Nevertheless, she is unusual among her contemporaries for the fact that she regards slavery as an unequivocal evil.

Later in her text, she offers a somewhat elliptical justification for understanding slavery more broadly.

If we take "servitude" in its most rigorous sense, the word would pertain only to those who are slaves, whether owing to the misfortune of their birth, to wars, or to poverty. But if we consider matters more broadly, "servitude" can be applied to everything that reveals the

effects of servitude, even though shrewd diplomacy gives them more pleasing and honorable names.

(Suchon 2010: 118)

Here, we see that slavery and “everything that reveals the effects of servitude” provides a model of domination, which she represents as a profound evil, with devastating consequences. In the case of women and girls, “shrewd diplomacy” endeavors to disguise this evil as a good.

Like many authors of the period, Suchon refers also to Greek, Spartan, and Roman slaves (Suchon 2010: 128). She mentions that, in contrast to Roman slaves who worked as teachers and who, albeit rarely, led intellectual lives, women are denied education (Suchon 2010: 137). She cites Augustine’s denial that there are slaves by nature approvingly, and seems, like the Stoics, to identify slavery with worldly misfortune (2010: 162). Like many Christian authorities, Augustine insists on natural human equality and advocates for the interests of enslaved people without calling the institution of slavery into question (Garnsey 1996; Ramelli 2017). Given the diversity of representations upon which both Tarabotti and Suchon draw to articulate their protests against the severity of constraints imposed upon their sex, they do not have a clear or univocal model of slavery to which they compare gender domination. Moreover, given that their discourses draw upon traditional moral and philosophical tropes, colonial slavery and the traffic in human lives do not seem to be the predominant forms of enslavement they have in mind. Nevertheless, Suchon shows awareness of the reality of chattel slavery, and feels the need to justify her extension of the name beyond the boundaries of this “great evil.”

In defending the natural equality of women, both Tarabotti and Suchon provide metaphysical and phenomenological support for their views that the interests and natures of women are not different from those of men. They use the language of slavery to articulate the injustice and harm of (physically and psychologically) confining women and girls and otherwise subjecting them to the authority and control of men. Yet, their liberal use of the idiom of slavery ultimately aims to serve their own cause and not the causes of servants or slaves. It thus appears that, at its origins, early modern European feminism invokes and excludes women subject to legal slavery. Early modern feminists are attuned to how male discourses of freedom and complaints against domination exclude the women and girls in their own homes. They pose a strong challenge to early modern republican ideals of freedom, which went unheard by most in the seventeenth century. They illustrate how challenges to paradigms of freedom and servitude tend to reflect particular experiences and practices of domination. To diversify and contest our own notions of what it takes to be free from servitude, we have much to learn from early modern women. At the same time, we must remain alert to how we have only begun recovering the voices of early modern women. Others remain buried and hidden.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1 There is unconfirmed speculation that Suchon may have read Tarabotti (Broad and Green 2009: 256–57), but the overlap in their analyses may simply be owed to the similarities in their situation.

2 Consider Plato:

And he, whose soul is so gourmand, alone of the men in the city can’t go anywhere abroad or see all the things the other free men desire to see; but, stuck in his house for the most part, he lives like a woman.

(*Republic* 579b)

3 Mary Nyquist dedicates her substantial and fascinating study to making sense of this relationship, but with no attention to early modern women or feminist writers (2013).

4 This citation contradicts Karen Offen’s findings that seventeenth century French feminists make “no references” to racial slavery (2008: 64).

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