

Strength and Superiority: The Theme of Strength in the Querelle des Femmes

Eric Wilkinson¹

¹ Department of Philosophy, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

E-mail: eric.wilkinson@gmail.com

Received December 2020

Accepted for publication March 2021

Published May 2021

Abstract

The querelle des femmes was an intellectual debate over the status of women that occurred in the early modern period, between the 1400s and 1700s. A common argument for the superiority of men and inferiority of women that appeared during the debate is that women are less physically strong than men, and are therefore inferior. In response, two distinct argumentative strategies were developed by defenders of women. First, some argued that men and women did not in fact differ in physical strength. A second strategy was to deny that physical strength is relevant to the question of superiority. In this case, one would argue that a difference in strength is not normatively relevant to evaluations of worth. I argue that this second strategy was the more effective response to the argument that women were inferior because of their alleged physical weakness compared to men.

Keywords: Strength, Feminism, Egalitarianism, Hierarchy

1. Introduction

The querelle des femmes concerned the status of women, and particularly whether they are equal, inferior, or superior to men. A common argument for the superiority of men and inferiority of women that appeared during the querelle is the claim that women are less physically strong than men, and are therefore inferior. In response, two distinct argumentative strategies were developed by defenders of women. First, some argued that men and women did not in fact differ with respect to the quality in question, in this case physical strength. The sophisticated variants of this argument suggest that there is no necessary difference between the strength of men and women, though there can exist a contingent difference in strength based on the circumstances under which women

live. A second argumentative strategy was to deny that the quality in dispute is relevant to the question of superiority. In this case, one would argue that any difference in physical strength does not matter when evaluating the comparative worth of the sexes. This second approach relies on a conception of moral relevance. An assessment of the comparative worth of the sexes is a normative evaluation, so only qualities which matter for normative evaluations are relevant to this assessment of worth. If physical strength is not a normatively relevant quality, one can dismiss any difference in physical strength between men and women as irrelevant to the dispute over the relative worth of the sexes. In what follows, I argue that the second strategy was the more effective counter to the misogynistic argument that women were inferior because of their alleged physical weakness compared to men.

2. Two Argumentative Strategies

The querelle des femmes refers to an intellectual debate which occurred in the early modern period, between the 1400s and 1700s. The debate concerned the status of women, with misogynist texts on one side purporting to demonstrate the inferiority of women, while advocates for women argued for their equality or superiority. In Medieval Europe, the prevailing philosophical views on women were developed by clerics working at universities and writing in Latin (King & Rabil xii), though the vernacular literary tradition also discussed the nature of women and their role in society. This tradition was “infused with misogyny” and it “portrayed most women as lustful or deceitful, while praising good housekeepers and loyal wives ... or the female saints and martyrs” (Ibid.). In the late fourteenth century, certain prominent misogynist works provoked the querelle des femmes. The translation of Matheolus’ Lamentations into French led Christine de Pizan to write a rebuttal, the *Book of the City of Ladies*. Likewise, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Il Corbaccio*, published in 1355, was a prominent misogynist manifesto. During the querelle, various works defending or exalting women responded either to the general negative attitude toward women, or were direct refutations of misogynistic screeds. Examples include Pizan’s response to Matheolus, or Lucrezia Marinella’s *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, written in reply to Giuseppe Passi’s *The Defects of Women*.

During the Renaissance interest was renewed in classical philosophy, particularly Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s claim in the *Republic* that women are capable of doing philosophy and equally entitled to rule was often cited by advocates for women (Equicola 11; Tarabotti 101; Gournay 56). However, Aristotle’s remarks on sexual differentiation were less amenable to women. According to the *Generation of Animals*, women are less hot than men, and this lack of heat makes them less physically and intellectually capable (775a5-15). More to the present point, the *Economics* states: “Nature has made one sex stronger, the other weaker...” (1343b29-30). Although the *Economics* is recognized today as not an authentic work of Aristotle, likely having been written by his student, it was accepted as Aristotle’s in the early modern period. On the basis of men’s greater physical strength, the *Economics* confines women to watching over the home while men pursue “active occupations” outside of the domestic sphere (1344a1-5). In fairness, the roles assigned to men and women are meant to be complementary, and men are told to honour their wives (Marinella 137). However, the activities associated with the highest human virtues found in the Aristotelian corpus, like study (*Nicomachean Ethics*

1177a20), are allotted to men, so the virtues proper to women are subordinate. The misogynist writers in the querelle often followed pseudo-Aristotle in arguing that women’s lack of physical strength evidenced their inferiority, and that it makes their subordination to men natural (Marinella 136). Those advocating for women naturally contested this conclusion.

The querelle des femmes thus consisted on one side of claims men were superior to women, and on the other side the claims that women were equal or superior to men. This raises the question: what does it mean to claim one sex is superior to the other? A claim of this sort, at its most general, is the claim that one or the other sex has a given quality to a greater or lesser extent than the other. A non-exhaustive list of qualities participants to the querelle purport one or the other sex to have in a greater abundance include such things as intelligence, virtue, nobility, constancy, or strength. When faced with this kind of claim to superiority—for instance, the claims in misogynist texts that men are physically stronger, and therefore superior—there are two possible strategies for rebuttal. Firstly, one can simply deny that women possess less of the quality in dispute, in this case strength. There is a myriad of ways to motivate this argument, like noting the variances in strength between men (Castiglione 214), or pointing to historical examples of physically strong women (Pizan 53). Sophisticated variants of this response often concede that women possess less of a disputed quality, like strength, but argue the difference is not a necessary feature of their sex but a contingent result of their circumstances. The purported weakness of women is explained in terms of lack of exercise.

A second argumentative strategy is to not deny that men and women differ with respect to a particular quality, but to argue the quality in question is irrelevant to their respective worth. This approach allows one to concede the existence of a difference between the sexes, but assert that this difference does not matter, and thus cannot be used to designate one or the other sex as superior. Consider, for instance, physical strength. A writer adopting this strategy can concede that men are typically physically stronger than women, but deny that this marks them as superior, since physical strength is not a quality the possession of which makes a person better than another. The nature of this argument is negative, in that it involves eliminating from discussion qualities that might differ between the sexes which are irrelevant to the question of their respective worth. Accordingly, this argumentative strategy cannot by itself be used to make a case that one or the other sex is superior, because it only removes some quality from consideration. However, upon designating the qualities which are irrelevant, authors usually go on to identify which qualities are relevant to

consideration of who or what is superior. Necessary to this argumentative strategy of distinguishing between the qualities that are relevant and irrelevant to assessments of worth is a conception of moral relevance. Moral relevance refers to the status of being relevant to normative evaluations. Evaluations of the comparative worth of the sexes are a kind of normative evaluation, so if some consideration lacks general moral relevance, it will be irrelevant to the specific question of which sex is superior. Clearly, not just any difference between two people is morally relevant to assessments of whether one is better than the other. If I claimed that Bob was superior to Margaret because Bob possesses more freckles, then those listening would likely object that this is not a morally relevant difference. The objection is motivated by an intuitive understanding that whatever principles exist that should inform our moral judgments, the number of freckles one has is not one of them. Disputes over the moral relevance of a property are in this way ethical controversies and “to advocate the relevance of a given fact is to subscribe to an ethical principle” (Emmons 228). When advocates of women in the querelle reject physical strength as relevant to comparative evaluations of worth they are in fact asserting, often implicitly, that there is some set of ethical principles by which it is appropriate to judge people, and physical strength is not one of them. As an argumentative strategy, this is powerful since it eliminates the need to quibble over whether women are in fact as strong as men.

3. Arguments Against Difference

Early in the querelle, defenders of women would respond to suggestions that women were physically weaker than men by rejecting the claim as straightforwardly false. As the question is empirical, one common method of responding to it was to point to purportedly empirical examples. Authors writing in the early modern period, including those involved in the querelle, did not draw strict distinctions between history and mythology for the sake of argumentation. Consequently, the examples used to illustrate the physical strength women could possess were drawn equally from historical and mythological anecdotes, since the lines between these were blurred for their authors. For instance, Christine de Pizan lauds the strength of “[t]hose ladies from Amazonia” who “had already accomplished so much through their physical strength that every country regarded them with fear and apprehension” (53). Similarly, Mario Equicola cites the physical prowess of Getulian and Galletian women, who do fieldwork alongside men, and

Bactrian women who fight in combat (10). Baldesar Castiglione more obliquely remarks that “there have always been women who have undertaken wars and won glorious victories” (215), and that this is known despite male historians often failing to adequately praise women. By themselves, these examples illustrate that women are capable of similar feats of strength as men, although they do not explain to an early modern reader why women undertaking such feats seem unusual or exceptional. To complete the argument, one must explain why women undertake such feats of strength less often despite being equally capable.

More sophisticated versions of these arguments deny that men and women differ in terms of physical strength as a matter of necessity. An author could concede that women are in fact physically weaker than men, but attribute this to a contingent feature of women’s circumstances, rather than any necessary difference between the sexes. Through reference to this contingent aspect of women’s situation, an author can explain why were all things equal, men and women would not differ in physical strength. In Moderata Fonte’s dialogue, *The Worth of Women*, one interlocuter contends that “if women do not bear arms, that isn’t because of any deficiency on their part, rather, the fault lies with the way they were brought up. Because it’s quite clear that those who have been trained in military discipline have turned out to excel in valor and skill” (100). In Fonte’s dialogue, a parallel is drawn between women’s physical and intellectual development. The Venetian women in the dialogue would have as few opportunities for intellectual development as physical training. Just as one would not expect women to excel intellectually without being educated (Tarabotti 97), women cannot be expected to excel physically without training. Any apparent differences between men and women are thus explicable not in terms of any natural physical difference, but instead the societal conventions which deny opportunities for development to women. Although compelling, this argument shares with the misogynist a presumption that the issue is fundamentally empirical.

Equicola developed a unique sceptical argument in recognition of the empirical nature of this dispute. The “naturalists” conjecture “that

women are cold and moist” but “what the naturalists affirm to us as certain amounts to nothing” because those studying nature intractably disagree (6). The question of what animals, and what parts of animals, are hotter or colder is described as being hotly contested. For instance, some theorists maintain that aquatic creatures are colder because of their environment, while others argue this is counterbalanced by aquatic creature’s innate warmth. Equicola then asks that if “hot and cold admit of so much uncertainty and controversy, what ought we to think about other sensory impressions?” (Ibid.). In the following paragraph he answers this by adding that some questions about nature are readily answered by sensory experience of them in normal life, but other “things are just plain insoluble and so obscure they are known only to Him.” As these questions are so inscrutable, Equicola concludes that it is foolish to use assertions about them as premises in one’s practical reasoning. By endorsing this scepticism, Equicola takes himself to be in continuity with a variety of methodological scepticism he associates with Plato (Ibid., 7). Though he primarily discusses the issue of heat and cold in this passage, Equicola does take the comparative strength of men and women as one of the insoluble questions about the natural world. To illustrate that this is so, he observes that “naturalists try to show that masculine things are larger than feminine” but points to the case of birds, where females are larger than males (Ibid., 5-6). He also remarks that some have argued that those with smaller, more compact bodies are stronger in comparison to those whose bodies are extended—so it is not even clear what constitutes strength. Given this controversy, grounding claims of superiority on the unclear notion of strength is foolish.

Notably, Equicola’s argument is not that strength is necessarily irrelevant to evaluations of superiority, but that we are not in an adequate epistemic position to know which sex would benefit from taking it into consideration. That is, considerations of strength are not dismissed on grounds of moral irrelevance, but on the epistemic grounds that they are unknowable. While this argument has the benefit of removing strength—and other bodily qualities—from consideration, the appeal to scepticism is only as strong as our empirical methodology and evidence are weak. The force of

Equicola’s argument relies in part on the historical context in which it was made, wherein empirical methods were less precise and scepticism about them thus justified. The methods of natural inquiry remained those of Aristotle, and their underdeveloped state justified doubt as to whether they could uncover truth. The early modern period would see methodological advances in natural philosophy, culminating in the Baconian and Cartesian methods, but this would come after Equicola’s writing. If one supposes Equicola’s argument is that these questions are fundamentally unknowable, in the sense that they are forever insoluble and refining our methods would never put us in a position to know about them, it is less plausible. Although empirical observations cannot support beliefs with epistemic certainty, certainty is too high of a standard to expect something to meet for use in one’s practical reasoning. The argument is more charitably read as making the weaker claim that certain questions of natural philosophy are insoluble using the methods of Equicola’s “naturalists.” This argument can only suspend our judgement on the question by calling into doubt the veracity of the available methods, but it does not ultimately deny that the question is empirical. The tactic of delaying can only be justified so long as one’s epistemic position remains poor, and thus cannot be maintained indefinitely as empirical methodologies improved throughout the history of science.

A final argument to consider here is that of Balesar Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier*. There he presents as a dialogue a fictional courtly debate over the worth of women. The character of Magnifico Giuliano remarks that accidental qualities adhere to either one’s mind or body (214). He then considers the argument that men are superior to women because of their bodily qualities, stating that “man being more robust, more quick and agile, and more able to endure toil, I say this little argues perfection” (Ibid.). The argument from superior bodily qualities fails because among men there are significant variances in the amount of strength possessed, and those who have more strength are not thought to be better in virtue of their strength, even in times of war where strength would presumably be most valued. To support his claim that any differences in strength between men and women are insignificant, Giuliano

points to ancient and modern history, wherein “there have always been women who have undertaken wars and won glorious victories” and “[a]s for manual works, it would be too long to tell of them” (Ibid., 215). Hence, differences in accidental qualities may be understood at an individual level instead of generalized to the sex. The upshot is that men are not superior to women with regard to accidental qualities, including physical strength.

Nevertheless, the argument in this passage presents some interpretive difficulties. Giuliano makes certain essentialist claims about women. For instance, he argues that those weaker in body tend to be mentally stronger, and on this basis argues “that women, being weaker in body, are abler in mind” (Ibid., 214). Similarly, Giuliano echoes the Aristotelian position found in the *Economics* in stating that nature created women adapted to a necessary end of raising children, and “although [nature] makes [women] unsteady of body and gives them a placid spirit and many other qualities opposed to men” the qualities of women are complementary to those of men (Ibid., 215). Squaring these statements with his argument that variances in accidental qualities between men and women are insignificant is not easy. One explanation is that, as a literary depiction of a courtly debate, the character of Giuliano is using every argument at his disposal, regardless of how well they connect, as one might in an actual, verbal debate. Alternatively, a charitable reading would be that there are differences in men and women’s constitutions, but not to such an extent that it prevents one or the other sex from being able to excel physically or mentally. Women’s bodies might be such that they are disadvantaged in physical training, but not so much that they cannot overtake the average man.

The argument in the *Book of the Courtier* provides a segue between arguments which deny the sexes differ with respect to strength, and those that deny that strength is morally relevant to evaluations of their respective worth. Castiglione’s argument approaches denial of the relevance of strength, in that he draws a distinction between strength and intellect, concluding that intellect is more important, and that women are superior in intellect (214). However, the conclusion is that the strength of men and women do not differ enough to tip the scales of

the comparison. It is not that strength is irrelevant, but that it does not favour either men or women when considered. As we will see momentarily, Bartolomeo Goggio makes a similar argument while arriving at the conclusion that physical strength is not morally relevant to the question of the worth of the sexes. The distinction might seem slight, but its significance lies in how the arguments against difference base their claims on the empirical question of relative strength, while arguments against relevance undercut this issue by trying to demonstrate that any differences in strength that exist do not matter.

4. Arguments Against Relevance

A compelling example of an argument that physical strength is irrelevant to evaluations of superiority is found in Bartolomeo Goggio’s *In Praise of Women*. Goggio considers the argument that “man is stronger of body and mind, and for this reason the [man] is superior to the [woman]” but counters that “one may easily respond that strength is worth little against intellect. And the latter is more acute in women than in men” (8). He denies that strength is a relevant consideration when assessing superiority, and also indicates that while intellect is a relevant quality to consider, critics of women mistakenly attribute to them less intelligence. This argument therefore draws an explicit contrast between strength and intellect as qualities relevant to evaluations of worth, with strength being discounted. Goggio anticipates an argument Thomas Hobbes would provide almost two-hundred years later in *Leviathan*. There Hobbes argued that people in the pre-societal state of nature are basically equal in terms of their comparative strength because any imbalance in strength is easily overcome by “secret machination, or by confederacy with others” (99). This conclusion, with respect to women, is the same as Goggio’s. Whatever differences in physical strength might exist between men and women, they are too meagre to entail anything once intellect is considered.

The comparison with Hobbes draws out further important features of Goggio’s arguments. Like Goggio, Hobbes’ argument is meant to demonstrate that individual strength is irrelevant, but what exactly it is irrelevant to differs according to Hobbes’ meta-ethical commitments. Hobbes is committed in *Leviathan* to an expressivist perspective on morality; the terms “good” and “bad” do not indicate for Hobbes claims of objective moral truth, but are expressions of preferences (44). This expressivist account of morality is a crucial step in Hobbes’ project in *Leviathan* because it undercuts any objections to his social contract theory an opponent could launch on the basis of considering independent moral principles. Since there are

only considerations of power, the social contract cannot be externally criticized as not according with some moral principle, because those moral principles are just disguised expressions of preference. This meta-ethical anti-realism which underwrites Hobbes' social contract theory is, of course, absent in Goggio. Throughout *In Praise of Women*, Goggio describes the moral relevance of different qualities people possess in terms of their relation to one's "nobility" (6). What precisely nobility consists in is unarticulated in Goggio, however "nobility" seems to generally refer to the culminative moral worth of a person or people. Goggio is then committed to a kind of moral realism wherein there are certain criteria relevant to normative evaluations of people, and those who score well on those criteria are more noble. Since strength is not among the class of things that can increase or decrease one's nobility, it is irrelevant to assessments of the comparative worth of individuals, or to the comparative worth of the sexes.

Goggio goes on to argue for the moral irrelevance of physical strength by pointing to how it is not commonly taken to be determinate of superiority in other contexts. He states that "if, as it is said that physical strength makes a person more noble, then undoubtably porters, who carry such heavy loads, would be nobler than any other gentleman of lesser strength, and this is false" (8). In this argument, Goggio notes that the relative physical strength of those being evaluated is normally taken to be irrelevant to one's "nobility." That is, Goggio appeals to the usual, implicit assumptions people have about what is relevant to moral evaluation to make the case that strength is not relevant to such evaluations. This distinguishes Goggio's argument from Castiglione's, which held that the differences in strength are too minor to count in either sex's favour, though they could were they not so meagre. Instead, Goggio appeals to the intuition that strength is simply not the kind of thing which is relevant to normative evaluations of people's character by appealing to how this view is purportedly evident in the existing social hierarchies. Although this conception of moral relevance is implicit in Goggio, it is more explicitly expressed in the work of François Poulain de la Barre.

Poulain de la Barre begins with the observation that many beliefs which people possess are unjustified prejudices that they believe on the basis of the prevailing customs around them (122). This "false concept of a custom" leads people to draw an incorrect inference: "if some practice is well established, then we think it must be right" (Ibid. 125). As everyone acknowledges that people should never act contrary to reason, they assume that the practices they encounter in everyday life must have been established according to reason. However, upon reflecting on human affairs, one finds that "reason has always been the weakest factor" in deciding societal customs (127). Instead, the factor which most determines the customs and

organization of a society is force, and the history of every society testifies to this reality. Whereas Goggio anticipated Hobbes' argument about the relative strength of individuals in the state of nature, Poulain is likely to have been influenced by Hobbes' views about the artificial nature of political power (Stuurman 177). Poulain explains the existing dominance of men over women by referring to the arbitrary role power has played in the development of society—and the starting point of his analysis is men's superior physical strength.

By establishing force as that which determines social customs, Poulain laid the groundwork for his speculative anthropology of women's domination. This "historical conjecture" begins with the claim that "[w]hen men realized they were stronger and that they were physically superior to women, they imagined they were superior in every other respect" (127). In the early, pre-societal state of nature, this invalid inference had limited consequences, and both sexes participated equally in hunting and agriculture. However, the "interruption of pregnancy and its after-effects reduced the strength of women for periods of time" which led to a voluntary dependency of women on men within the family (Ibid., 128). This dependence informed the division of labour within the family; women were assigned domestic duties, while men used their strength to work outside of the home. At this historical juncture, Poulain speculates, some young men in the family would not submit to the authority of their elder male relatives. When forced to leave, these young men would form new clans, and would gain property for themselves by stealing goods and enslaving the goods' owners. The women in these captured clans would thereby transition from the voluntary dependence of the state of nature to the involuntary subjugation of a society where they are property of their husbands. Certain men "encouraged by the success of their victory, decided to extend their conquests" raising armies made up of men "chosen as suitable for enterprises that required more strength" (128-129). These conquests consolidated societies in which the laws were made exclusively by the conquering men, and the custom of women being limited to domestic work was enshrined in the law. Thereby custom became the basis of excluding women from occupations, religious ministry, and sciences.

Although the assumption that men possess greater physical strength is the starting point of his speculative anthropology, Poulain appears to contradict this assumption later in the same work. In the second part of *A Physical and Moral Discourse*, he gives arguments that appear to deny any difference in strength, instead of arguments denying strength is morally relevant. Like Castiglione, Poulain notes that there "are strong and weak people of both sexes" (184). The explanation of this is to be found in how much one exercises—since women are not

encouraged or in some cases even permitted to exercise as much as men, they unsurprisingly are less physically strong. As we earlier saw in Fonte, this line of argument has been used to deny that there are significant differences in strength between the sexes. However, this presents an apparent problem for Poulain's speculative anthropology, since it takes as its starting point the superior strength of men to explain the arbitrary nature of men's suppression of women. If there are no significant differences in strength between men and women, one cannot appeal to men's superior strength as part of one's explanation of how they came to dominate. The solution to this conundrum is to conceive of exercise as closing a gap in bodily strength that initially exists between men and women. Poulain implies this in stating that his argument "suggest[s] that if both sexes exercised to the same extent, one could possibly become as strong as the other" (184; emphasis mine). This solution permits Poulain to assert both that men have a natural advantage in physical strength, which facilitates his speculative anthropology, and that this natural advantage evaporates at higher levels of physical exercise. Poulain's position is in fact supported by empirical research, which finds that differences in strength between athletically trained men and women are less pronounced than those in the general population (Gater et al, 44).

Underpinning the historical conjecture is a supposition that strength is not morally relevant, hence the domination of men over women does not accord with reason. To appreciate this, contrast Poulain's speculative anthropology with that of pseudo-Aristotle in the *Economics*. In both works the greater physical strength of men is credited as the origin of the division of labour in the family. However, pseudo-Aristotle does not distinguish between the descriptive of how the division of labour came about, and the normative ought of whether women's domination by men is justified. The Aristotelian work surmises from its speculative anthropology that the dominance of men over women is natural, and therefore morally justified. However, as David Hume famously argued, one cannot derive a moral conclusion from a descriptive account without introducing a moral premise (335). Poulain anticipates this distinction by recognizing that one cannot conclude on the basis of a speculative anthropology of the kind he provides that women's subjugation is morally justified, unless one accepts the premise that might makes right. Since Poulain explicitly rejects this premise (153), his historical conjecture reveals that the domination of men over women rests on an arbitrary foundation when assessed ethically. Echoing Goggjo (6), Poulain observes that were strength the deciding factor of one's worth "brute animals would be superior to humans" and that philosophers, princes, and generals would be inferior to men suited to nothing but hard labour (185). The customs that disenfranchise women

are thus arbitrary, as their foundation is a distinction based on strength. Hence Poulain concludes that the customs should be abolished and women's equality recognized.

In a similar vein to Poulain, Arcangela Tarabotti had earlier denied that strength is morally relevant while using men's physical strength to explain features of their dominance over women. In *Paternal Tyranny*, Tarabotti assures the reader that she cannot "pass over in silence men's folly when they extol their strength to Heaven and cast our own 'weakness' into the deepest abyss" (47). She rejects the physical strength exhibited by men as being relevant to evaluations of worth since it is not even "true strength," which "lies in conquering one's passions" (*Ibid.*). An explicit contrast is drawn between these two qualities with one being singled out as morally relevant and the other rejected. This evokes Plato's conception of the soul, wherein justice consists in reason ruling over the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul (Plato 305). To use Castiglione's distinction between the two possible kinds of accidental qualities, those of the mind and the body (214), Tarabotti is identifying 'true' strength with an accidental quality of the mind while rejecting its identification with accidental qualities of the body. By shifting the terms of the debate from physical strength to mental fortitude, Tarabotti lays the groundwork for her argument that women are superior. Unlike men, women are "forever virtuous, resistant to every push and pull of ill-conceived thoughts and desires" but men are "nothing but inconstant" (47-48). Her denial of physical strength's relevance enables Tarabotti to argue that on the appropriate criteria for evaluation, women outperform men.

In fairness, Tarabotti states that women in fact do outclass men in physical strength, despite her assertion that "true" strength consists in mental rather than physical fortitude. She claims that "everybody knows how much stronger women are in conceiving and bearing children, which they carry for nine months without tiring" (47). This claim is seemingly at odds with her firm distinction between physical strength and the "true" strength of conquering one's passions, in which women excel. In this case, Tarabotti likely values consistency less than forcefully arguing for women's superiority. Nevertheless, there is nothing inconsistent in her asserting that physical strength is morally irrelevant yet, for the record, women outclass men in terms of physical strength anyway.

The physical strength of men and superior mental fortitude of women are used in Tarabotti to explain the subjugation of women. Men's physical strength leads them to think that "evil is good and good is evil" in that they glorify killing in war, and believe taking violent revenge for an insult displays more strength than bearing it without retaliating (Tarabotti 47). Women's greater mental and emotional fortitude helps them to avoid these vices as it prevents them from falling prey to the desires which incline

men to war and violence. Men's inconstancy is used later in *Paternal Tyranny* to explain men's subjugation of women, particularly in the case of their forcibly confining women to convents. Tarabotti states that "men glory ostentatiously in such misdeeds with the same pride [they] dared display up to the Golden Age, full of ambition, treachery, and bestial idolatry" (68). This includes fathers taking pride in the forced confinement of their daughters for the purposes of improving their status or reducing their financial burdens. Since men are less capable of exhibiting true strength and resisting desires which would incline them to evil, they unjustly suppress women. Tarabotti's assertion that the morally relevant qualities are those of mind rather than bodies reflects a common distinction in the querelle. Arguments denying difference or denying relevance are often a prelude to arguments that women are equal or superior to men on the basis of qualities of mind. For instance, both Augustino Strozza (14) and Marie de Gournay (65) note that the distinct attribute of human beings is a rational soul, which both sexes possess equally. Arguments against difference, and those against relevance, differ in that the latter make attributes of the rational soul the exclusive basis of normative evaluations of people, while the former maintains that they are one kind of consideration to be weighed against others, but strength weighs in neither sex's favour.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of the querelle des femmes identified two argumentative strategies used by advocates for women in the debate who addressed the issue of the sexes' relative strength. The first, represented here by Pizan, Fonte, Equicola, and Castiglione, denies that any significant differences exist between men and women's physical strength. The second, illustrated through the examples of Goggio, Poulain, and Tarabotti, contends that any differences in physical strength that exist between men and women are irrelevant to ethical evaluations of the sexes' respective worth. The second of these arguments rejects physical strength as an appropriate criterion of assessment, while the first maintains that it is, but denies that consideration of it favours one or the other sex. However, neither argument takes physical strength to be the exclusive criterion on which to base assessments of the sexes' relative worth—even the first argument which accepts strength as a valid criterion. Instead, defenders of women in the querelle almost universally point to mental attributes as either carrying more weight, or being the exclusive criterion in an assessment of

relative worth. Naturally, those who deny differences in strength between men and women are those who believe mental attributes merely carry more weight, while those who reject physical strength believe that mental attributes are the exclusive criterion. Both arguments are then often a precursor to shifting the focus of the debate from physical to mental attributes, though the denial of relevance does this more successfully. By leaving physical strength open as a valid criterion of assessment, arguments that deny difference must weigh considerations of strength against all others when assessing worth.

The chief advantage of the denial of relevance as an argumentative strategy over the denial of difference is that the question of how physical strength bears on the comparative worth of the sexes is settled. If an argument that physical strength is irrelevant is successful, no amount of new empirical evidence that one sex is stronger than the other can upset the established conclusion that this empirical fact does not matter. Conversely, relying on the denial of differences in strength to argue the equality of the sexes holds the issue hostage to an empirical question that remains to be decided. Recall Equicola's sceptical argument, which held that the empirical methods available in his day could not justify drawing conclusions about relative strength of the sexes (6). At best, one can argue on this basis that the jury remains out and one should suspend judgment on the question. However, as empirical methodologies are refined it becomes increasingly difficult to epistemically justify the suspension of judgment. The trouble with the denial of difference is that it leaves open this possibility that by conceding the relevance of strength to the question of worth, the advocate for women might be backed into a corner when new empirical information on the issue becomes available. Those relying on the denial of differences must always be on their guard against new evidence, and prepared to explain it away should it arise. The defender of women who denies the relevance of physical strength does not share this argumentative obligation, and can reject strength out of hand as not bearing on the question of whether one sex is superior to the other.

The second advantage of denying the relevance of strength is that an author is then able to concede that men possess more physical strength and put this concession to use argumentatively.

Robbed of its normative importance, men's strength can be used to explain how they asserted their dominance over women, or even as the basis for an argument that women are the superior sex. For Poulain, differences in men and women's relative strength are used in his speculative anthropology to account for how the social hierarchy which subordinates women to men was formed (127). The customary exclusion of women from various occupations, religious ministry, and the sciences, are explicable through a purely descriptive account of power relations that take as their starting point natural differences in physical strength. Only by denying that physical strength has any normative import can Poulain have it do all this explanatory work in his speculative anthropology. Similarly, Tarabotti gets some argumentative mileage out of men's physical strength after denying its moral relevance. She maintains that in possessing greater physical strength men are tempted by the vices of war and violence, while women are not similarly led astray (47). As in Poulain, men's physical strength is here used to partly explain why they have suppressed women, though here the account refers not to the division of labour in the state of nature, but the inclination of men to certain vices. In addition to doing this explanatory work, Tarabotti argues that the violent vices men are inclined toward by their strength make them inferior in virtue to women. Conceding men's greater physical strength thus opens up avenues both to give a descriptive explanation of how men came to dominate, and to ground an argument that women are superior to men in morally relevant areas.

As an argumentative strategy, the denial of relevance therefore makes available to a writer resources that the denial of difference cannot, for the purposes of explaining women's subjugation or even arguing that women are superior to men. When coupled with how the denial of relevance precludes the possibility of future empirical interventions upsetting calculations of relative worth between the sexes, it emerges as the more powerful argumentative strategy of the two commonly utilized in the querelle to contest the claim that men's physical strength makes them superior. The arguments denying the relevance of physical strength retain their force even today, when improved empirical research favours the view that there exist natural differences in physical strength between men

and women, albeit ones that are less pronounced at higher levels of fitness (Gater et al. 44). The existence of this difference in physical strength is unlikely to persuade a contemporary reader that men are "superior" to women, in no small part because most people are implicitly committed now, as Poulain was, to the view that "sheer physical strength should not be used to distinguish between human beings" (185). The denial of difference thus has the approval of posterity, in that no normative theory takes physical strength as an appropriate basis for moral evaluations of worth.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Generation of Animals*. Trans. Arthur Platt. Infomotions Inc., 2000.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Second Edition. Trans. Terence Irwin. Hackett Publishing, 1999.
- de Gournay, Marie. "The Equality of the Sexes." *The Equality of the Sexes*. Ed. Desmond Clarke. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- de Pizan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings*. Trans. Ineke Hardy. Eds. Sophie Bourgault & Rebecca Kingston. Hackett Publishing, 2018.
- Castiglione, Baldesar. *The Book of the Courtier*. Trans. Charles S. Singleton. Anchor Books, 1959.
- Emmons, Donald. "Moral Relevance." *Ethics*, Vol. 77, No. 3, 1967, pp. 224-228.
- Equicola, Mario. *About Women*. Trans. Stephen Kolsky. Unpublished Manuscript, 2020.
- Fonte, Moderata. *The Worth of Women*. Trans. Virginia Cox. University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Gater, Denise; et al. "Strength training for female athletes: A position paper." *National Strength and Conditioning Association Journal*. Vol. 11, No. 4, August 1989, pp. 43-55.
- Goggio, Bartolomeo. *In Praise of Women*. Trans. Lara Harwood-Ventura. Unpublished Manuscript, 2020.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Eds. G.A.J. Rogers & Karl Schuhmann. Continuum, 2005.
- Hume, David. *Treatise of Human Nature*. Clarendon Press, 2014.
- King, Margaret; Rabil, Albert Jr. "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe." *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*. Ed. Anne Dunhill. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

- Marinella, Lucrezia. *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*. Trans. Anne Dunhill. University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Plato. *Republic*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. The Floating Press, 2009.
- Poulain de la Barre, François. "A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of both Sexes." *The Equality of the Sexes*. Ed. Desmond Clarke. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Pseudo-Aristotle. *Economics*. Trans. G.C. Armstrong. Harvard University Press, 1935.
- Strozza, Augustino. *In Defence of Women*. Trans. Marguerite Deslauriers, Lara Harwood-Ventura, Marco Piano. Unpublished Manuscript, 2020.
- Stuurman, Siep. *Francois Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality*. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Tarabotti, Arcangela. *Paternal Tyranny*. Trans. Letizia Panizza. University of Chicago Press, 2004.