“A Serious Proposal to the Ladies”
Early Modern Women on Education, Liberty, Love, and Happiness

Course Description
This course offers advanced undergraduate students across the humanities a survey of early modern women’s writings on education, liberty, love, and happiness. How did women of the 17th and 18th centuries think and write about these issues? By looking at writings by a variety of women philosophers, some more in the style of philosophical argumentation, others more literary, students will discover a rich tradition of women thinking about women and sexual politics long before the advent of 19th- and 20th-century feminism. In doing so, the course will give students both the opportunity to consider some of the most fundamental questions in moral and political philosophy, and introduce them to different forms of feminism and their history. In addition, it will invite them to reflect critically on historiographical questions about canonization, and also more generally about how and why to study the past. For example, does it make sense to think of thinkers writing 300 years ago as feminists, or is that just a "vile anachronism" as some scholars believe? And if it does make sense, what forms of feminism can we discern in the early modern period?
This is an advanced, discussion-based seminar, aimed at philosophy majors and advanced undergraduates from related disciplines with some background in philosophy.

Course Goals & Plans for Assessment
By the end of the course, students will…

• have gained an appreciation of the significance of women philosophers of the period, and of the ways in which their work can shape our understanding of both early modern and contemporary feminist philosophy
• have a better sense of some of the central topics of discussion among female philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries, including sensitivity to their main motivations and historical context, and proficiency in stating these positions
• be able to critically evaluate these positions by identifying their consequences and assessing them for plausibility or reconstructing their supporting arguments and assessing these arguments for cogency

Students will be assessed through class participation, presentations of their work in the seminar, and seminar papers. There will be weekly reading responses (15% of grade, assessed only on a pass/fail basis), a shorter mid-term paper (20%) and a longer final paper (10% for outline, 35% for finished paper). Course participants will have the opportunity to present some of their research. Class participation and presentations will count for 20% of the grade.
1. Introduction: Feminist History of Philosophy

week 1: Feminisms, Old and New
Rae Langton, “Feminism in Philosophy”
Hilda L. Smith, “Intellectual Bases for Feminist Analyses: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”

optional: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Feminism”

week 2: Feminist History of Philosophy: Gender and the Canon
Eileen O’Neill, “Disappearing Ink”
Lisa Shapiro, “Some Thoughts on the Place of Women in Early Modern Philosophy”
Witt, Charlotte, “Feminist Interpretations of the Philosophical Canon”


2. Beginnings: La Querelle des Femmes

week 3: Christine de Pizan & Marguerite de Navarre
Christine de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies (selections)
Marguerite de Navarre, Heptameron (selections)
Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des femmes"

week 4: Male perspectives on the Querelle des Femmes
Erasmus, "The Abbot and the Learned Lady"
François Poullain de la Barre, “The Woman as Good as the Man” & “On the Equality of the Two Sexes” (selections)


3. Freedom & Education

weeks 5 & 6: A Serious Proposal to the Ladies
Mary Astell, A Serious Proposal to the Ladies
Anna Maria van Schurman, “A Dissertation on the Natural Capacity of Women for Study and Learning”; “A Practical Problem: Whether the Study of Letters is Fitting for a Christian Woman”
Gabrielle Suchon, Treatise on Ethics and Politics (selections)
Louise-Marie-Madeleine de Fontaine (“Madame Dupin”), “Ideas on Education”

optional: Jane Duran, “Christianity and Women’s Education: Anna Maria van Schurman and Mary Astell”; Séverine Auffret, “Gabrielle Suchon”; Michèle Le Dœuff, “Feminism is Back in France — Or is it?”

weeks 7 & 8: Female Fiction - Margaret Cavendish and Mary Wollstonecraft
Mary Wollstonecraft, The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria
Margaret Cavendish, selections from Paper Bodies

4. Love & Marriage

week 9: Mary Astell and Damaris Masham on Love and Pleasure
Astell and John Norris, *Letters Concerning the Love of God* (selections)
Damaris Masham, *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (selections)

week 10: Love that Binds: Anne Conway and Margaret Cavendish
Cavendish, *The Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (selections)
Anne Conway, selections from *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*

week 11: Reflections Upon Marriage
Astell, *Reflections Upon Marriage*; Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure*
Suchon, “On the Celibate Life Freely Chosen”
optional: Jacqueline Broad, “Mary Astell on Marriage and Lockean Slavery”; Erin Lang Bonin, “Margaret Cavendish’s Dramatic Utopias and the Politics of Gender”

5. Happiness

week 12: Cartesian Critics: Elisabeth of Bohemia and Anne Conway
Elisabeth and Descartes, selections from their correspondence
Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (selections)

week 13: Emilie du Châtelet and Madame Dupin: Two Enlightenment Thinkers
Emilie du Châtelet, “Treatise on Happiness”
Madame Dupin, “Ideas on Happiness”
optional: Erica Harth, selections from *Cartesian Women* on Châtelet; Dorinda Outram, “Enlightenment Thinking about Gender.”