reinforcing the status of this new bilingual edition as a major contribution to early modern literature, history, culture, and gender studies.

Deborah Lesko Baker
Georgetown University


Domna C. Stanton’s ambitious and long-awaited book examines the workings of what she calls the “dynamics of gender” in the early modern period. Rejecting essentialist approaches, Stanton grounds her study in a “dynamic” theory of gender where gender is always shifting and impossible to define once and for all, and is therefore subject to constant renegotiations, accommodations, concessions, and resistances. Since gender is a relational construct, her study is also about men even as it focuses on women. While the Dynamics of Gender is centered on seventeenth-century French literature, Stanton’s impressive scholarly reach, exemplary methodology, and crucial questions about decoding gender in earlier periods make her work essential reading for students and scholars of the early modern period across the disciplines. Stanton’s deep engagement with contemporary critical theory and her lucid interrogation of what “reading-as-a-feminist” means — its ethical and political implications and responsibilities — confirm her well-earned place at the forefront of feminist criticism today.

Stanton endorses and masterfully deploys a methodology of historically grounded close textual analysis to reveal and complicate normative discourses on women and men as well as counter-discursive narratives. Through impeccably close readings of texts examined in interplay with other discourses and counter-discourses of the period, Stanton shows early modern texts to be extraordinary sites for reconstructing the interrogation and negotiation of the period’s unstable and contradictory gender norms. She consistently embraces the complexities of the dynamics at work in each of her chosen texts, never accepting a singular or simplified reading but instead welcoming the contradictions and tensions revealed within each text as opportunities to complicate the understanding of gender in early modern France. Indeed, it is Stanton’s insistence on analyzing discourses
and counter-discourses in all their dialectical tension, rather than defaulting to traditional binary oppositions, that marks her daring critical stance.

As the book’s subtitle, “Women Writ, Women Writing,” suggests, Stanton’s study of the dynamics of gender treats, in two equal parts, both works written about women by men (the anonymous author of the 1623 *Receuil général des caquets de l’accouchée*, Racine, Fénelon, and Poulain de la Barre) and works written by women (La Guette, La Fayette, and Sévigné). The introduction presents a helpful overview of the major movements and themes that characterize the period’s longstanding debates about women, which she renames the *querelle des femmes et des hommes*. Stanton understands the authors she examines as operating within a set of constraints and limitations imposed by the rules of discourse and decorum of their historical period, yet she also investigates the ways in which they negotiate means of accommodation through both conformity and resistance. The book’s chapters span the genres of the period, examining satirical fiction, pedagogical treatises, classical tragedy, personal memoir, novella, and epistolary writing. Stanton explores texts that have received little critical attention and challenges past readings of some better-known works with carefully chosen textual evidence, drawing on contemporary critical theory to elucidate and complicate her approaches and interpretations. Butler and Foucault are key figures here, but she productively draws many other critical voices into the discussion. Stanton’s elegant writing is crafted with an obvious love for words and attention to style. Scholars of French literature in particular will appreciate her inclusion of the original French in her footnotes, as well as her improvements on existing translations that appear in square brackets within quotations.

In chapter one, “Recuperating Women and the Man Behind the Screen: (Un)classical Bodies in *Les caquets de l’accouchée* (1622)?,” Stanton examines a collection of texts in which a recovering melancholic man listens in on and records women’s conversations during a lying-in. Stanton shows that while the *caquets* tradition typically cast women’s talk as worthy only of male derision, in these texts, parallels between the *accouchée* and the male protagonist–narrator feminize him. Stanton highlights how the women’s *caquets* are recuperated to critique the very social disorders women were seen as causing. At the same time, she convincingly argues that the women’s bawdy critiques of men cannot be dismissed. In a move characteristic of her work as a whole, she underlines the importance of maintaining normative and counter-normative discourses in tension in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the dynamics of gender.
Chapter two, “The Daughters’ Sacrifice and the Paternal Order: Racine’s *Iphigénie en Aulide,*” takes on traditional readings of the play that ignore issues of gender and fail to account for women’s specificity. Stanton analyzes Iphigénie as the perfect daughter—subject of her patriarchal father and absolutist king, whose ownership is nonetheless contested between rival men. Stanton demonstrates the significance of Racine’s modification of the classical plot for his seventeenth-century audience in his introduction of Eriphile as Iphigénie’s sacrificeable double. The product of Helen’s adultery, the jealous Eriphile exemplifies the feminine disorder that must be eliminated for paternal order to be restored. In taking her own life, Eriphile momentarily reaffirms women’s agency to create disorder. Yet, in the end, Racine’s play reinforces the differences between good and bad women and good and bad subjects of the absolutist state: all remain victims of the paternal order.

Chapter three, on “The Female Mind Reformed,” examines the gendering of pedagogical theory in the 1670s and 1680s, juxtaposing Poullain de la Barre’s *De l’éducation des dames* (1674) and Fénelon’s *De l’éducation des filles* (1687). Here Stanton provides a thorough account of the historical and cultural movements that influenced thinking about women’s learning in the period. She analyzes how each of these treatises—although the earlier is emancipatory while the latter is regressive—both countered and reinforced gender norms while promoting the reformation of the female mind as the key to improving society.

Part II, “Women Writing,” begins with a chapter devoted to the remarkable memoirs of Catherine Meurdrac de La Guette (1681), in which the author describes her heroic exploits during the Fronde. “The Heroine at War: Self-Divisions in La Guette’s ‘Extraordinary’ Memoirs” (chapter four) shows how La Guette appropriates the aristocratic masculine tradition of memoir writing to glorify her acts and defy traditional class and gender roles, thus inscribing herself as an aristocratic man. At the same time, Stanton reveals the emergence of a divided consciousness in La Guette’s narrative between this defiant self and a moralizing conformist self that alternately reaffirm and undermine the normative.

In chapter five, “From the Maternal Metaphor to Metonymy and History: Seventeenth-Century Discourses of Maternity and the Passion of Mme de Sévigné,” Stanton argues that contrary to the widely accepted idea that the advent of intimacy between mother and child was a product of the eighteenth century, a new conception of the mother was already emerging around 1660. She shows how Sévigné’s excessive affection for her daughter, which has been read as imitat-
ing heterosexual love, must be read intertextually with other mother–daughter correspondences of the period as a performance of superior and passionate maternal love. Stanton examines the “umbilical drama” of disconnection and reconnection played out in Sévigné’s letters, in which the mother figures herself as the abandoned daughter, and her daughter as the abandoning mother.

The sixth and final chapter, “Overreading, Without Doubt: Ambiguity and Irony in La Princesse de Montpensier,” dismisses reductive interpretations of La Fayette’s 1662 novella that cast it as an inferior precursor to La Princesse de Clèves and a moralizing tale. Instead, Stanton interprets the ambiguity of the ending and the plot’s elusiveness and contradictions as evidence of a negotiation on the part of the author who must conform to some dominant norms in order to resist them. Stanton provides a fascinating analysis of the gender-ambiguous Conte de Chabannes and of the final words of the published text, where the ironic introduction of “sans doute” makes all the difference.

Stanton’s remarkable book joins a long line of excellent titles published in Ashgate’s interdisciplinary series on “Women and Gender in the Early Modern World,” edited by Allyson Poska and Abby Zanger. This important series has contributed to deepening and complicating understandings of gender dynamics in the early modern world, something that Stanton’s new study accomplishes brilliantly. She draws on recent volumes in that series focused on France by Faith Beasley, Elizabeth Goldsmith, Kirk Read, and Rebecca Wilkin, in addition to earlier ground-breaking studies on women in early modern France and Europe (among them Beasley, Joan Dejean, Erica Harth, Wendy Gibson, Joan Kelly, Carolyn Lougee, Ian Maclean, Linda Timmermans). Stanton’s meticulous notes and her extensive bibliography represent a treasure trove of primary sources and scholarship for students and more advanced scholars. Her erudition and scholarly range are astounding, the fruit of decades of deep critical engagement with questions surrounding women and gender in early modern France and today. Wide-reaching, impeccably researched, and methodologically exemplary, Stanton’s Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France is certain to become a classic that will inform future work on women and gender for years to come.

Katherine Dauge-Roth
Bowdoin College