

BOOK REVIEW

***Antigone's Example: Early Modern Women's Political Writing in Times of Civil War from Christine de Pizan to Helen Maria Williams.* By Mihoko Suzuki. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 452 pp. \$119.99 (cloth), \$89.00 (ebook). ISBN: 9783030844547.**

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In *Antigone's Example*, Mihoko Suzuki argues that civil war is an enabling condition that allows women to make substantive interventions in politics. Challenging Giorgio Agamben's notion of civil strife as a politically disabling "state of exception," Suzuki draws on the works of 15 women authors in early modern England and France to argue that civil war was politically empowering, enabling these women to use their literary skills to intervene as political counselors. In defending this thesis, Suzuki shows how these women contributed to a transnational history of ideas about civil war that developed from the Hundred Years' War through the aftermath of the French Revolution. The result is a rich history of women writers who are engaged not only with foundational questions of politics, but also with each other.

The book begins by using *Antigone* as point of departure, showing how this play, and its early modern reception, exemplifies the idea that women's political participation is a response to civil war. The first chapter turns to Christine de Pizan, whose civil war writings are understudied relative to her feminist ones. The chapter also raises interesting points about Christine's influence on (or, more plausibly, anticipation of) Machiavelli, whose writings on political division later women writers would explicitly engage. The second chapter explores how English women, such as Anne Dowriche, Mary Sidney, and Elizabeth Cary, translated and engaged with texts from French religious wars to counsel English rulers. The third chapter discusses the writings of four French authors involved in the Fronde. Their writings, memoirs, and reports detail and justify their own participation in the conflict. The fourth chapter explores the political writings of Margaret Cavendish, who accompanied Henrietta Maria to France during the English Civil Wars. Here, Suzuki offers an original interpretation of Cavendish's political sympathies, showing her to have a much more ambivalent royalism

than those interpretations which simply conflate her views with her husband's. The fifth chapter turns to post-Restoration civil war writings in England, showing how Katherine Phillips, Aphra Behn, and Jane Barker's translations and poetry reveal their desire to mediate between the opposing sides of political divides. The final major chapter explores the writings of Louise de Kéralio, Stéphanie de Genlis, and Germaine de Staël, who wrote in the aftermath of the French Revolution; Suzuki shows how the relative neglect of the first two thinkers by current scholars might be due to their ambiguous views about women in politics.

A virtue of Suzuki's book is that it breaks down key barriers to the full inclusion of women in the canon of political thought. She does this, for example, by expanding the genres of political writings beyond standard political treatises to include translations, poetry, and plays. She additionally refuses to reduce women's political thought to their sexual politics. There is a tendency in contemporary scholarship, as Suzuki notes, to recover only women's "feminist" writings. Overemphasizing their sexual politics, however, continues to relegate women to the sidelines of the history of political thought and often produces a distorted understanding of their views. Suzuki convincingly shows that civil war politics—questions about the body politic, just war, monarchism, and republicanism—were often at the heart of women's political projects.

While I appreciate how this book attends to women's writings beyond their feminist thought, I think Suzuki could have been less apologetic when discussing their positions that could be described as anti-feminist. In the sixth chapter, Suzuki expresses some embarrassment about the ambivalent feminisms of Kéralio and Genlis. Describing Kéralio's misogynist criticisms of women in politics in *The Crimes of Queens*, Suzuki claims it is "ironic" that a republican woman would write a text that works to delegitimize women's participation in politics (366). Genlis's insistence on the exclusion of women from politics is also excused by Suzuki as necessary for her own "political efficacy and even survival" (404). The impression one gets of Kéralio and Genlis, then, is that their anti-feminist views are a sort of embarrassing inconsistency—they do not defend women's political rights while exercising those rights themselves.

I would be cautious, however, about treating these anti-feminist perspectives as inconsistent. After all, it is precisely this view of women authors—that they are unfortunately inconsistent and paradoxical—that contributes to the phenomenon of women's "disappearing ink" (O'Neill 1997). Indeed, by centering women's civil war interests, rather than their sexual politics, Suzuki has provided us with the theoretical tools to make sense of these kinds of anti-feminist passages. Throughout the book, Suzuki shows how women are motivated to quell divisions produced by civil war. In doing so, these women are eliminating the very conditions of their own participation. And this seems to be a self-conscious strategy adopted by these women—while they do justify their own participation, they see this as an *exceptional* response to civil war, not something that ought to be regularized. Unsavory as these anti-feminist aspects of their thought may be, it hardly constitutes an embarrassing inconsistency that needs to be excused.

Among its many contributions, I believe *Antigone's Example* serves as a model for those who wish to engage with the history of women's political writings. It

would also be particularly useful for instructors who wish to include women in their courses related to the history of political thought. Suzuki's work shows us that women's contributions extend well beyond feminism, but touch on many other central questions of politics.

## Reference

O'Neill, Eileen. 1997. "Disappearing Ink: Early Modern Women Philosophers and Their Fate in History." In *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, ed. Janet A. Kourany. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 17–62.

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