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VALERIO ZANETTI

AMAZONS IN THE FLESH

Defining the Female Athletic Body in Seventeenth-Century France

»If there is any difference between men and women, this has to be limited to the exercise of war« affirmed Madeleine de Scudéry in her collection of female heroic harangues, published in 1642¹. Uttered by one of the many illustrious women brought to life in the treatise, this declaration well summarised the state of the debate on gender equality in mid-seventeenth-century France². By this time, an increasing number of feminist authors such as Mademoiselle de Scudéry voiced their conviction that women's minds could be reformed and even achieve intellectual perfection should they gain access to a well-rounded education³. In his tract »On the Equality of the Sexes« (1673), the Cartesian philosopher François Poullain de la Barre adopted a scientific outlook on the matter and concluded that the »mind, working similarly in both sexes, is equally capable«⁴. The same, however, could not be said for the body. Deeply entrenched beliefs in the inherent corporeal weakness and instability of the female sex still prevented any serious consideration of their engagement in the military. Mademoiselle de Scudéry herself thought it laughable that a woman should prove her worth on the battlefield⁵: »I know better what are the limits of women's courage«, she wrote in a letter from 1646, »and [I am] far from suggesting that they should go to war; indeed I almost object that they should often talk about it«⁶.

Such attitudes certainly appear in contrast with the spirit of an age dominated by powerful female rulers. Since the middle of the sixteenth century, France saw three female regents hold the reins of government and more noblewomen play an active role during the wars of religion (1562–1598) and the civil unrest of the Fronde (1648–1653)⁷. Such political circumstances generated a wave of sentiment in favour of female militancy, which found its most powerful expression in volumes that gathered exemplary portraits of heroines from history as well as myth and biblical tales. These publications abounded with examples of active femininity, which were

1 Madeleine de SCUDÉRY, *Les femmes illustres ou les harangues héroïques*, Paris 1642, p. 426. All translations are the author's own.

2 The quote is taken from the volume's final harangue »Sapho to Erinne«.

3 Elsa DORLIN, *L'Évidence de l'égalité des sexes. Une philosophie oubliée du XVII^e siècle*, Paris 2001; Donna C. STANTON, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France. Women Writ, Women Writing*, Farnham 2014, p. 89–119.

4 François POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'égalité des deux sexes*, Paris [1673] 1676, p. 100.

5 Anne R. LARSEN, Anne Marie de Schurman, Madeleine de Scudéry et les *Lettres sur la Pucelle* (1646), in: Isabelle BROUARD-ARENDS (ed.), *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*, Rennes 2003, p. 269–279.

6 Letter to Valentin Conrart dated 1 December 1646, in: Édouard de BARTHÉLEMY, René KERVILER (ed.), *Un tournoi de trois poucelles en l'honneur de Jeanne d'Arc. Lettres inédites de Conrart, de Mlle de Scudéry et de Mlle de Moulin*, Paris 1878, p. 23.

7 Eliane VIENNOT, *La France, les femmes et le pouvoir. Les résistances de la société (XVII^e–XVIII^e siècle)*, vol. 2, Paris 2008, p. 50–58.

saluted as *femmes fortes*, strong women, and clad in the classical garb as Amazons⁸. Mademoiselle de Scudéry's own treatise found its place within this burgeoning literature, including a discourse by the belligerent queen Zenobia and proudly displaying the figure of an armed Amazon on the frontispiece (fig. 1). Behind the armour and heroic trappings, however, these representations were often disconnected from any notion of female physical strength. Domna Stanton has highlighted this paradox and showed how the *générosité* (courage) of the *femme forte* was conceptualised as a virtue of the soul rather than the body⁹. Joan DeJean has similarly questioned the relationship between female acts of violence and artistic depictions of violent women in early modern France¹⁰. Both look at the widely influential treatise »The Gallery of Strong Women« (1647), in which Pierre Le Moyne squarely placed the »armed and robust force« as subordinate to the superior spiritual force that pervades the *femme forte*¹¹. Female rulers such as Anne of Austria, to whom the work is dedicated, are said to be moved by the highest type of goodness, which is »victorious without weapons and conquering without violence«¹². In virtue of her piety, the Queen Regent is able »to win battles and conquer cities all over Europe [...] without leaving her private cabinet«¹³. Thus the exceptional and potentially subversive Amazon became recognisable in light of traditional feminine canons and was turned into a universal model (fig. 1).

Anne of Austria and Mademoiselle de Scudéry never entered the fray of a battle, but other women did. The military feats of Alberte-Barbe de Saint-Baslemont (1607–1660) and Philis de La Charce (1645–1703), for example, were well known and celebrated during their lifetimes. Riding at the head of armed troops and launching an attack, these noblewomen could not but be described as Amazons in the flesh. Other ladies earned the same title on account of their equestrian prowess, shown not on the battlefield but on the hunting ground¹⁴. Laden with powerful symbolic meaning, these practices were also – and most importantly – connected to forms of corporeal training that were traditionally considered the preserve of men¹⁵. Such display of athleticism enacted by real-life Amazons represented a powerful statement of the physical strength of the female body, which proved able to rival that of men. This corporeal side to the seventeenth-century *querelle des femmes* has hitherto received little attention from scholars, who have tended to isolate artistic representations and theoretical formulations from actual practices. More generally, historical scholarship has only recently begun to investigate early modern attitudes towards female sport. Studies by Alessandro Arcangeli and Wolfgang Behringer have offered broad overviews highlighting discrepancies between strict prescriptions and more liberal practices across Europe¹⁶.

- 8 Bettina BAUMGÄRTEL, Silvia NEYSTERS, *Die Galerie der starken Frauen. Regentinnen, Amazonen, Salondamen*, Munich 1995; Derval CONROY, *In the Beginning was the Image. Feminist Iconography and the Frontispiece in the 1640s*, in: *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 23/1 (2001), p. 27–42.
- 9 STANTON, *The Dynamics of Gender* (as in n. 3), p. 129–130.
- 10 Joan DEJEAN, *Violent Women and Violence against Women: Representing the »Strong« Woman in Early Modern France*, in: *Signs* 29/1 (2003), p. 117–147.
- 11 Pierre LE MOYNE, *Preface*, in: ID., *La galerie des femmes fortes*, Paris 1647. The volume was reedited five times in France and two Elzevier editions were also published in the Netherlands.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 13 *Dedicatory Epistle »To the Queen Regent«*, in: *ibid.*
- 14 Isabelle VEAUUVY, *Adélaïde de SAVRAY, Isabelle de PONTON D'AMÉCOURT* (ed.), *Chevalières Amazones. Une histoire singulière*, Paris 2016, p. 57–100.
- 15 Valerio ZANETTI, *Holding the Reins. Female Horse Riding and Aristocratic Authority in Seventeenth-Century France*, in: *Ludica. Annals of the History and Culture of Games* 25 (2019), p. 125–143.
- 16 Alessandro ARCANGELI, *Exercise for Women*, in: Rebekka von MALLINCKRODT, Angela SCHATTENER (ed.), *Physical Exercise in Early Modern Culture. New Perspectives on the History of Sports*

Focusing on seventeenth-century France, this article investigates changes in the conceptualisation of the female athletic body. It starts by defining the place of exercise in contemporary medical culture and how this related to the female body. It then explores how the most reactionary strands of medical discourse permeated the burgeoning pedagogic literature that dealt specifically with women's education. Finally, the essay considers how more progressive views on women's exercise started to emerge in the middle of the century, finding mature expression in the work of the physician-turned-scholar Pierre Petit (1617–1687). Under the guise of an erudite dissertation, his 1685 treatise »On the Amazons« presented an original medical study of the strength of the female body that recognised its ability to grow stronger through exercise and to rival the male body. In Petit's narrative, the Amazon was no longer a figure of legends but, the embodiment of a woman able to achieve her full athletic potential.

Medical Exercise and the Humoral Female Body

In Renaissance Europe, exercise was defined as the balance between quiet and movement. Following traditional Hippocratic–Galenic models of the human body, it was listed as one of the six non-natural factors that contributed to the healthy management of a person's complexion¹⁷. Advice on how to manage one's athletic activity ultimately depended upon each individual's unique temperament, while also following general rules determined by age and gender. Male and female bodies were thought to be essentially different on account of their opposite humoral make-up, moist and cold for women, hot and dry for men¹⁸. Moreover, a woman's anatomy was considered inherently weaker and unstable on account of the nefarious influences of her »wandering womb«¹⁹. While moderate exercise was recommended to expel the excess of moisture that characterised the female constitution, vigorous exertion was to be avoided at all costs since it caused a dangerous increase in temperature. Renaissance health regimens, therefore, advised ladies to indulge preferably in passive or gestational forms of movement suitable for weaker constitutions²⁰. Walking at a slow pace was also thought most suitable for them, whereas dancing was treated with great caution, praised as beneficial when moderate and feared as perilous when agitated²¹.

Medical conceptions of the female body in seventeenth-century France did not diverge drastically from the Renaissance model. Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore has argued how the humoral definition of woman as an »imperfect man« gradually made space for an anatomical discourse that placed greater emphasis on the debilitating effects of her reproductive organs²². The uterus in particular was described as a troublesome entity whose stirrings caused paleness, nausea,

and Motion, London 2016, p. 147–163; Wolfgang BEHRINGER, *Kulturgeschichte des Sports: Vom antiken Olympia bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 2012, p. 169–173.

17 Sandra CAVALLO, Tessa STOREY, *Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy*, Oxford 2013, p. 145–178. Other non-naturals were air, food and drink, sleep, repletion and evacuation, and emotional life.

18 Katherine CRAWFORD, *European Sexualities, 1400–1800*, Cambridge 2007.

19 Evelyne BERRIOT-SALVADORE, *Un corps, un destin. La femme dans la médecine de la Renaissance*, Paris 1993, p. 23–33 and Laurinda S. DIXON, *Perilous Chastity. Women and Illness in Pre-Enlightenment Art and Medicine*, Ithaca 1995.

20 CAVALLO, STOREY, *Healthy Living* (as in n. 17), p. 146–147.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 170–177; Alessandro ARCANGELI, *Dance and Health. The Renaissance Physicians' View*, in: *Dance Research* 18/1 (2000), p. 3–30.

22 Evelyne BERRIOT-SALVADORE, *De l'ornement et du gouvernement des dames. Esthétique et hygiène dans les traités médicaux des XVI^e et XVII^e siècles*, in: Cathy MCCLIVE, Nicole PELLEGRIN, *Femmes en fleurs, femmes en corps. Sang, santé, sexualité, du Moyen Âge aux Lumières*, Saint-Etienne 2010, p. 37–58.

fainting spells and suffocation. Freed from these ailments, noted the celebrated midwife Louise Bourgeois (1563–1636), women »could be as healthy as men in both mind and body, but God made them inferior to avoid any jealousy between the sexes«²³. Popular publications, however, continued to promote traditional Galenic understandings of sexual difference. In his collection of natural questions published in 1606, the historian Scipion Dupleix squarely blamed women's mutability on their »imperfect temperament, being colder than men's«²⁴. Directly inspired by Dupleix's work, Pierre Bailly's own publication from 1628 reiterated that female »natural« inconstancy was but a necessary consequence of an inconsistent complexion²⁵.

The simplistic understanding of Galenic medicine displayed by these authors, neither of which was a trained physician, emerges more patently in their discussion of exercise²⁶. Dupleix's concise treatment of the subject was limited to highlighting the crucial importance of physical activity in stimulating a healthy digestion and expelling bad humours²⁷. Bailly agreed on this point, adding that the best time to take exercise is before a meal, since the »heat generated by the exercise [...] expels through sweating, or other insensible means, all superfluous matter«²⁸. Although no gender-specific considerations are made in either treatise, cues emerge pointing to crucial differences in the way men and women should exercise. When dealing with the question of whether or not it is possible for a girl to turn into a boy, Bailly referred to current anatomical beliefs in the fundamental similarity of reproductive organs, female genitals being identical to men's but concealed within the belly²⁹. »Should that be true«, the author continued, »female dancers, jumpers, and mannish women (*hommasses*) would easily become men because of such natural impulses aided by those violent jolts«³⁰. Thus he exposed exercise's dangerous potential to trigger physiological changes. Resting on more unstable biological grounds, a woman's sexuality was considered especially fluid and tending naturally towards the perfect male configuration. Strenuous activity was thought to stimulate such changes on account of its sheer physical force coupled with the sharp variation in temperature.

Health Regimens

Unlike Dupleix and Bailly's miscellanies of natural curiosities, contemporary medical treatises did not delve into the sexual effects of athletic activity. Following the model of Renaissance manuals on healthy living, a number of publications addressed exercise as one of the key elements in a balanced regimen. The first such volume to appear in the seventeenth century was »The Government necessary for everyone to live long and healthily« published by the royal physi-

- 23 Louise BOURGEOIS, *Observations diverses sur la sterilité, perte de fruit, foecondité, accouchements et maladies des femmes et enfants nouveaux naiz*, Paris, 1617, p. 77. On the author, see Bridgette A. SHERIDAN, *Patronage and the Power of the Pen. The Making of the French Royal Midwife Louise Bourgeois*, in: *Early Modern Women* 13 (2018), p. 58–79.
- 24 Scipion DUPLEIX, *La curiosité naturelle rédigée en question selon l'ordre alphabétique*, Paris 1606, p. 112.
- 25 Pierre BAILLY, *Questions naturelles et curieuses*, Paris 1628, p. 228, 237.
- 26 Christophe BLANQUIE, *Un magistrat à l'âge baroque. Scipion Dupleix (1569–1661)*, Paris 2007; Xavier de SAINT-AIGNAN, *Vulgarisation médicale et mélange des genres. Les Songes de Phestion de Pierre Bailly (1634)*, in: Andrea CARLINO, Michel JEANNERET (ed.), *Vulgariser la médecine: du style médical en France et en Italie*, Geneva 2009, p. 137–148.
- 27 DUPLEIX, *La curiosité naturelle* (as in n. 24), p. 102.
- 28 BAILLY, *Questions naturelles et curieuses* (as in n. 25), p. 220.
- 29 Thomas LAQUEUR, *Making Sex. Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge 1990; Helen KING, *The One-Sex Body on Trial. The Early Modern Evidence*, Farnham 2013.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 267–268.

cian Nicolas Abraham de La Framboisière in the year 1600³¹. Chapter XIX, entirely dedicated to the balance of quiet and movement, opened with the usual acknowledgment that by augmenting bodily heat, exercise greatly favoured the digestion of nutrients and the evacuation of superfluous matter³². A further advantage of exercise, La Framboisière added, is that it hardens the limbs, thus rendering them stronger and the whole body »more agile and better disposed«³³. While recommending moderation as a general rule, the author recognised that different temperaments require different regimens. A phlegmatic constitution, for example, necessitates »more vehement and sudden exercise« to counteract its moist and cold inclination, whereas a bilious one demands »soft and slow« activity³⁴. Following the existing Renaissance trend, La Framboisière praised walking as the best form of exercise »suitable for everyone«³⁵. Running and jumping are also useful to stimulate the appetite, but can too easily »tire those with a weak brain«³⁶. Horse riding was commended as invigorating to both mind and senses with comparatively little consumption of energy, whereas riding in a carriage was said to be by comparison a far more strenuous activity liable to agitate the humours³⁷. Dancing is presented as a useful and pleasant exercise insofar as it »renders the body cheerful, well-disposed and skilful; the mind lively, gay and joyous«³⁸. It is said to be singularly beneficial for ladies since it brings about their menstrual cycle. However, they are categorically forbidden to dance the *volta* »since it confounds the brain, disturbs the mind, and exhausts the body to the point that it ends up causing many dangerous illnesses«³⁹. Indeed, pregnant women are warned that if they indulge in this pastime, they are most likely to give birth prematurely.

Published in 1618, »The Portrait of Health« by Joseph Du Chesne (1544–1609) offered a more articulated and innovative study of exercise, which united methodically referenced quotes from classical authorities with original reflections on current practices. In his approach to the topic, the French physician admitted following in the footsteps of the Italian Girolamo Mercuriale, whose own work had investigated the key function of gymnastics as preventive medical practice⁴⁰. Being alternatively »strong and violent, moderate, or limited and soft«, exercise is said to strengthen all parts of the body and suit different ages, seasons, times of the day and temperaments⁴¹. Like La Framboisière, Du Chesne too only mentioned women in relation to dancing, which he praised as a most effective way to fashion young people's carriage and fortify the body. It is said to be especially crucial for girls to acquire the »good grace and good demeanour that become them marvellously«⁴². Indeed, dancing is proclaimed as appropriate for

31 La Framboisière (1560–1636) also taught at the University of Reims. Laurence Brockliss notes how he was the first to publish in the vernacular for the benefit of those without academic medical training. See Laurence BROCKLISS, Colin JONES, *The Medical World of Early Modern France*, Oxford 1997, p. 99.

32 Nicolas Abraham de LA FRAMBOISIÈRE, *Le Gouvernement nécessaire à chacun pour vivre longuement en santé*, Paris [1600] 1608, p. 102–103.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 105–106.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 105–106.

40 Joseph DU CHESNE, *Le pourtraict de la santé*, Paris [1618] 1627, p. 293. First published in 1569, Mercuriale's tract »De arte gymnastica« was first reprinted in Venice (1573) and then in Paris (1577). See Jean Michel AGASSE, Girolamo Mercuriale. Humanism and Physical Culture in the Renaissance, in: Girolamo MERCURIALE, *De arte gymnastica*, ed. and trans. by Vivian NUTTON, Florence 2008, p. 866–867.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 291–292.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

women as hunting is for men⁴³. The essential difference between athletic regimes for the two sexes is made more explicit within Du Chesne's discussion of exercises tailored to different constitutions. Whereas men are encouraged to engage in a multitude of laborious exercises, women are relegated in the same category as the elderly and anyone with a fair complexion. These »delicate people«, the author advised, should confine their activities to moderate endeavours such as singing, reading, board games, and – most importantly – taking long promenades in the mornings and evenings⁴⁴. The female body, regardless of its age and robustness, was thus relegated to an altogether different group from the ideal healthy male.

This binary gendered narrative is somewhat complicated by the appearance of women within a discussion of wrestling. With reference to various classical authors, Du Chesne reported how the female population of Sparta, from young girls to old women, was trained to fight alongside men in order to prepare for all kinds of corporeal hardships⁴⁵. Confronted with such egalitarian athletic practices, the seventeenth-century author limited his comment to a harsh criticism of mixed nakedness, which he deemed »altogether too shameful«⁴⁶. His anodyne attitude probably followed the example of Mercuriale, who often referred to ancient practices but conspicuously failed to address contemporary women's sport⁴⁷.

The few remarks expressed by Du Chesne remained the most extensive discussion of female exercise for decades. Gaspard Bachot's collection of »Popular errors concerning medicine« (1626) approached the subject only in relation to body weight⁴⁸. The royal physician lamented how ladies and girls are particularly prone to lose weight in an unnatural fashion because of travelling, tiredness or prolonged anxiety⁴⁹. To regain the ideal embonpoint, Bachot recommended a lot of sleep and abstaining from any form of sudden and vehement exercise⁵⁰. On the other hand, he criticised fashionable women's habit of taking a nap right after the morning repast in order to gain weight, inviting them instead »to get dressed and take moderate exercise«⁵¹. In his treatise »The art of living long« (1630), Pierre Jaquelot similarly commended the fattening property of a »slow and poised« promenade, which he defined, according to what had become an almost formulaic expression, as »the most common of all exercises« and »suitable for everyone«⁵².

Moderation remained the common denominator of all medical pronouncements on exercise later in the century. »[E]xcessive movement renders the body thin and bilious«, warned the renowned physician and man of letters Guy Patin (1601–1672) in his »Treatise on the preservation of health« (1632), but »too little exercise makes it heavy and lazy, which is why one should behave with great discretion and moderation«⁵³. »Eschew all violent exercises, as they heat and dry up«, urged Antoine Porchon in 1684, recommending instead a light promenade and all

43 Ibid., p. 321.

44 Ibid., p. 328–329.

45 Ibid., p. 298.

46 Ibid., p. 298–299.

47 MERCURIALE, *De arte gymnastica* (as in n. 40), p. 283, 405.

48 GASPARD BACHOT, *Erreurs populaires touchant la médecine*, Lyon 1626. Little is known about Bachot aside from the fact that he was awarded a medical degree in 1592.

49 Ibid., p. 405.

50 Ibid., p. 405–406.

51 Ibid., p. 408.

52 PIERRE JACQUELOT, *L'art de vivre longuement, sous le nom de Médée*, Lyon 1630, p. 150. See Magdalena KOZŁUK, Jean-Paul PITTION, *La Médée de Pierre Jaquelot. Médecine, culture humaniste et thérapeutique des passions*, in: Jacqueline VONS (ed.), *Actes du 50^e colloque international d'études humanistes. Pratique et pensée médicales à la Renaissance, centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance* (Tours), Paris 2009, p. 187–200.

53 GUY PATIN, *Traité de la conservation de la santé*, Paris 1632, p. 106.

»moderate exercises, since they fortify the joints and the flesh«⁵⁴. In his »Happiness of life or the Secret of health« (1666), Pierre Dalicourt offered advice tailored to each different complexion, ending with a generalised exhortation to »restrain from all excess«, in exercise as in all other things⁵⁵. Arranging their prescriptions by complexion, neither of these vernacular guides mentioned practices especially suited to women.

The silence was broken in 1668 with the appearance of a treatise written in Latin by the physician Pierre Gontier⁵⁶. Despite its anachronistic language and its plethora of old-fashioned remarks, the book abounded with references to current French practices. Within a classical dissertation on jumping, for example, Gontier carefully examined what he termed *Gallorum saltationes*, that is fashionable dances such as *courantes*, *voltes* and *gaillardes*. These activities were said to be equally enjoyed by men and women, as they trained the former for war and helped the latter acquire »the corporeal discipline that is most suited to their sex«⁵⁷. Gontier also described the French habit of taking a promenade along the fashionable *Cours* »where people of both sexes and all conditions gather«, some strolling and some riding on horseback or in a carriage⁵⁸. Walking was especially praised for its power to »ease all kinds of troubles and benefit people of all age, sex and complexion«, a slow pace being best suited to women, the sickly and delicate⁵⁹.

The curiosity towards contemporary practices that marked Gontier's treatise also informed a publication from the following year, Michel Bicaise's 1669 manual on »The manner to govern one's health through what surrounds us, through what we receive, and through exercises, or modern gymnastics«⁶⁰. As the title suggests, the third and final section of the treatise is entirely dedicated to exercise, which the author is determined not to discuss without delving unnecessarily into ancient customs⁶¹. To suit his intended purpose, Bicaise's medical outlook incorporated recent anatomical insights gathered from autopsies and new mechanical descriptions of physiology⁶². More specifically, his study of exercise mingles traditional humoral beliefs with a new attention to the workings of muscles and nerves⁶³. Another original aspect of Bicaise's work is the attention placed on exercise during childhood, to which an entire section of his book is devoted. In this context, girls make a first appearance as the object of particular attention. In the author's opinion, it is good for them to indulge in games that exercise their arms such as throwing knucklebones or partaking in snowball fights⁶⁴. Such diversions are said to prepare them for the future toils of spinning and weaving, which took their toll principally on the upper limbs and could, in the worst cases, impact their reproductive faculties⁶⁵. Bicaise also deemed a sedentary life, in the literal sense of the term, most pernicious since it inhibited the

54 Antoine PORCHON, *Les règles de la santé ou le régime de vivre des sains*, Paris 1684, p. 43–45. Little is known of the author of this treatise, who presented himself as »doctor in medicine« and a client of Nicolas-Louis de Bailleul, Marquis de Château-Gontier.

55 Pierre DALICOURT, *Le bonheur de la vie ou le secret de la santé*, Paris 1666, p. 48–89.

56 Pierre GONTIER, *Exercitationes hygiasticae, sive de sanitate tuenda et vita producenda libri XVIII*, Lyon 1668.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 475; ARCANGELI, *Dance and Health* (as in n. 21), p. 3–30.

58 GONTIER, *Exercitationes hygiasticae* (as in n. 56), p. 491.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 492.

60 Michel BICAISE, *La manière de régler la santé par ce que nous environne, par ce que nous recevons, et par les exercices, ou la gymnastique moderne*, Aix 1669. The author introduced himself as doctor and professor of Medicine at the University of Aix.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 227.

62 Laurence BROCKLISS, *French Higher Education in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. A Cultural History*, Oxford 1987, p. 391–440.

63 BICAISE, *La manière de régler la santé* (as in n. 60), p. 232–233.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 242–243.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

regular evacuation of excessive substances. Being particularly at risk of experiencing »persistent obstructions«, women of every age were encouraged to walk often, especially after lunch. In light of up-to-date physiological knowledge, the author explained how the movement from women's thighs would act upon the uterus via the ligaments, helping to release any discharge of superfluous matter⁶⁶. Carriage riding was recommended for the same reason, and so was dancing, as they cause women to transpire and agitate stagnant humours by violently shaking the lower limbs⁶⁷. In spite of their innovative general outlook, Bicase's views ultimately reinforced traditional prejudices concerning athletic femininity. Women were indeed encouraged to engage in physical activity, but exclusively out of medical necessity and more specifically to prevent nefarious afflictions of the reproductive system. Exercise was not intended as a strategy for bodily self-improvement, but rather prescribed as a prophylactic tool to stem the flow of overabundant humours the female body was still thought to produce.

Treatises on Women's Health

While seventeenth-century printed regimens often dealt with women's health only tangentially, an emerging medical genre dealt exclusively with the peculiarities of the female body. The work of the physician and agronomist Jean Liébault (c.1535–1595) placed itself at the forefront of the new interest in female anatomy. Consisting essentially in an augmented translation of the work by the Italian Giovanni Marinello, Liébault's »The illnesses of women and their remedies« first appeared in 1582 and knew vast popularity, being reprinted in 1585, 1598 and finally 1609⁶⁸. In this treatise, the health of a woman was considered chiefly in relation to its reproductive function. While still a virgin, a young girl was at risk of suffering from a bloating of her flesh (*bouffissure*) caused by water retention and wind brought forth by a »cold and humid intemperance«⁶⁹. It was advisable in such cases to purge any internal excrements »provoking menstruations by every possible means«; alongside a diet of easily digestible food and little drink, it was recommended to »exercise the body moderately and friction it with coarse linen«⁷⁰. Once a girl had fulfilled her reproductive destiny and was expecting a child, a stricter regime was to be prescribed. Pregnant women should avoid any violent action including walking too fast, sitting down and standing up too suddenly, running, and – most importantly – they should not under any circumstances dance or ride on horseback⁷¹. They were forbidden to carry heavy loads or move their arms up and down too often or too suddenly; their legs instead should never be crossed or left dangling from a chair, since this was likely to cause deformity in the child⁷². Promenades instead were allowed so long as they were to be taken at a slow pace. Indulging in other forms of »soft and moderate« exercise was also permitted, provided that »they should not cause any weariness«⁷³. As the moment of giving birth approached, more intense walks, »going back and forth to the point of tiredness«, were instead recommended as most beneficial⁷⁴. However, the author concluded, a pregnant woman should never ride in a carriage, since

66 Ibid., p. 322.

67 Ibid., p. 253, 282.

68 Jean LIÉBAULT, *Les maladies des femmes & remedes d'y celles, en trois livres*, Paris 1609. On the author and his work on women's medicine, see Evelyne BERRIOT-SALVADORE, *De l'ornement et du gouvernement* (as in n. 22).

69 Ibid., p. 15.

70 Ibid., p. 16.

71 Ibid., p. 653.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

many ladies have given premature birth as a consequence; if they need to be carried somewhere, this should be done in a litter⁷⁵.

Virtually identical advice was given by Jacques Duval in his 1612 treatise »On Hermaphrodites and women's pregnancies«⁷⁶. All expecting women, the author maintained, should not cross their legs, leave them dangling, or ride in carriages⁷⁷. Most importantly they should avoid dancing, especially the *volte* and the *courante*, for such dances are »so dangerous, that they seem to have been expressly invented by the worst enemy of the human race«⁷⁸. Indeed, the physician explained, their violent movements cause discharges that in the most lamentable cases have prevented honourable girls and ladies to produce any offspring. Whilst claiming that his remarks were addressed »not just to the peasant girl, but also to the lady and even to the princess«, Duval allowed for differences according to at least two different types of complexion⁷⁹. Women who are naturally strong and robust, endowed with a »hard« constitution, were warmly invited to »exercise their body, albeit without violence«⁸⁰. Those who are »tender and delicate« instead should »keep to their room, avoid all exercise, even moderate, and lie on the bed most of the time«⁸¹.

In addition to endangering the natural progression of a pregnancy, poorly managed physical activity was thought to prevent women from being able to conceive in the first place. In his 1625 study of women's sterility, the physician Louis de Serres affirmed that »movement and rest, or exercise and idleness [...] both taken in correct measure, marvellously improve their fecundity, whereas their incorrect administration greatly contributes to their infertility«⁸². Sloth is innate in most women, the author claimed, but he pronounced himself confident that, following his advice, »they will soon change tune and, instead of giving themselves to laziness, they will determine to embrace another way of life and take up some honourable exercise«⁸³. If moderate, this activity will be enough to revive the »natural heat« that would otherwise lie dormant, »as if absorbed in the depths of those superfluous humours« that naturally overflow in women's bodies and are the principal cause of sterility⁸⁴. On the other hand, immoderate exercise in its many guises, de Serres continued, is »greatly prejudicial to the fertility of women« regardless of their temperament⁸⁵. It is said to »overheat the blood of those who are hot, bilious, and of amorous complexion; spoil and corrupt that of the phlegmatic, since it agitates their bad humours without getting rid of them, and finally dries up that of the melancholic«⁸⁶. Excessive dancing was again singled out as the most dangerous activity, whose nefarious effects on women's reproductive ability are said to be comparable only to those of horse riding on men⁸⁷. Indeed,

75 Ibid., p. 654.

76 Jacques DUVAL, *Des hermaphrodites, accouchemens des femmes, et traitement qui est requis pour relever leur santé, & bien élever leurs enfans*, Rouen 1612. On the author and work, see Valerie WORTH-STYLIANOU (ed. and trans.), *Pregnancy and Birth in Early Modern France. Treatises by Caring Physicians and Surgeons (1581–1625)*, Toronto 2013, p. 224–336.

77 Ibid., 167.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., p. 160.

80 Ibid., p. 160–163.

81 Ibid., p. 166.

82 Louis de SERRES, *Discours de la nature, causes, signes et curation des empeschemens de la conception, et de la stérilité des femmes*, Lyon 1625, p. 191. On the author and work, see WORTH-STYLIANOU, *Pregnancy and Birth* (as in n. 76), p. 296–302.

83 Ibid., p. 192.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., p. 194.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., p. 194–195.

fashionable dances were held up as »the veritable causes of sterility«, explaining how their violent movements are often responsible for detaching the embryo from the uterine walls⁸⁸.

In his treatise, De Serres also listed physical activity amongst the remedies to get rid of excessive weight, which is blamed for rendering women »sickly, incapable of moving at liberty, odious to their husbands and infertile for life«⁸⁹. To those suffering from such an affliction, he recommended tiring activities and promenades to be taken especially in the morning, which is said to be a crucial time of the day, during which women should »not rest at all, but instead exercise as much as they can«⁹⁰. Conversely, women who desire to gain weight should live in a temperate climate and avoid all occasions leading to tiredness and sweating. Should they be endowed with a cold and humid temperament, however, exercise is still most necessary regardless of body weight⁹¹.

The interplay of a weaker humoral makeup and overbearing procreative needs remained key to female health past the middle of the century, when the teachings of the physician Jean de Varandée (c.1564–1617) were translated into the vernacular and appeared as a new »Treatise on Women's Diseases«⁹². Published in 1666, this volume opened with the traditional acknowledgement of women's substantial difference on account of their cold and humid temperament, which was identified as the original cause of their valetudinarian constitution. With reference to Galen, the author explained how the *cacochimie*, or collection of bad humours, engendered a *cachexie*, literally a »bad habit« of the body resulting in pale complexion and inflated flesh⁹³. This sickness was so widespread amongst women that Varandée did not hesitate to pronounce it »endemic«, especially amongst the »ladies of quality, beautiful, widows or unmarried«⁹⁴. Later the treatise targeted more specifically certain women of the court, whose body was made flaccid and sensitive by the habit of sleeping too long and sitting for hours to sew. Other female courtiers, instead, are said to ruin their health by staying awake all night »in order to enjoy dancing or other violent exercises« that interfere with the digestion and generate bad humours⁹⁵. Where ill-advised physical activity was at the root of the evil, however, sensible exercise could also be part of the cure; indeed, Varandée pronounced moderate exercise to be crucial. This should not be too violent to begin with, otherwise the convalescent would suffer palpitations and breathing difficulties; when she starts to recuperate instead greater agitation is useful to dissipate any lingering bad humours. Once a woman has regained good health, the physician concluded, »a husband is the most appropriate of all remedies« and the pleasure enjoyed within marriage the best tonic⁹⁶. Varandée mentioned exercise once more within his discussion of the correct habits to be observed during pregnancy. As a general rule, he stated, expectant women should not engage in any violent activity »avoiding dancing, tiring themselves carrying or dragging heavy weights, riding in a carriage, cart or on a wild horse likely to throw them off their seat; and finally, they should not do anything that could agitate their body«⁹⁷.

More or less moderate, preventive or curative, female exercise prescribed in medical texts was meant to act primarily on a deep humoral level, regulating the ebbs and flows of the fluids

88 Ibid., p. 196–198.

89 Ibid., p. 439–440.

90 Ibid., p. 442–444.

91 Ibid., p. 450–451.

92 Jean de VARANDÉE, *Traité des maladies des femmes*, Paris 1666. A first Latin edition entitled »De affectibus mulierum« had been published in 1619. Born in Nîmes, Varandée became dean of the faculty of Montpellier in 1609.

93 Ibid., p. 6.

94 Ibid., p. 1–2.

95 Ibid., p. 5–6.

96 Ibid., p. 13.

97 Ibid., p. 364.

that moved inside a woman's body. It was also to be carefully considered in relation to the reproductive apparatus, mostly in terms of the damage it could cause. The »hardening« and strengthening of limbs and muscles instead were left entirely to the men. While the female constitution was to be maintained healthy by oscillating around a delicate and elusive medium, a male body could aspire to a progressive and competitive dynamic of corporeal improvement. This persisting dichotomy in medical prescriptions was often reflected in pedagogic literature from the period.

The Pedagogic Discourse

Physical training had traditionally played an increasingly central part in the moulding of the ideal man in early modern France, as medical beliefs became indissolubly bound with moral considerations and a straight body was regarded as the outward marker of an upright spirit⁹⁸. Male scions of the aristocracy, moreover, were expected to show specific corporeal qualities that immediately manifested their credentials as future military and political leaders. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the required traits underwent a marked shift from the display of brute force to the exhibition of grace and dexterity that alluded to a complete mastery over one's passions and baser instincts⁹⁹. Though such qualities were supposed to be inbred and determined by »blood«, great pains were taken to educate young aristocrats' bodies as well as minds. During infancy, tutors made sure that a noble boy's daily routine would involve some form of outdoor activity, usually a morning promenade; a series of masters would then be engaged to teach them the noble arts of riding, fencing and dancing¹⁰⁰. Meanwhile, pedagogic treatises, mostly the work of ecclesiastics or moral writers, included specific considerations regarding the physical attributes befitting the aristocratic body. In 1614, the Jesuit François Loryot endowed the ideal nobleman with an agile and nimble body, »ready to every move« required in times of war as well as peace¹⁰¹. As the century progressed, these traits became desirable in any healthy young man of sound morals. In his »Rules on the education of children« (1687), the Port-Royal pedagogue Pierre Coustel strongly advocated all exercises that, in addition to fortifying the body, promoted a »free and honest countenance« reflecting all the beautiful qualities of the soul¹⁰². More specifically, he recommended dancing to produce a graceful demeanour, horse-riding to make the body more robust, hunting to prepare for the labours of war and finally swimming, which was thought to be generally beneficial. His body and spirit fortified, a man earned his divine right to preside over the rest of God's Creation, starting with his own family. In 1698 the writer Eustache Le Noble still affirmed that a husband had the right to exercise complete authority over his wife since »nature made him more imposing, more agile and more robust« in the same way that »his mind has greater strength, breadth of scope and penetration«¹⁰³.

98 Georges VIGARELLO, *Le Corps redressé. Histoire d'un pouvoir pédagogique*, Paris 1978.

99 ID., *S'Exercer, jouer*, in: Alain CORBIN, Jean-Jacques COURTINE, Georges VIGARELLO (ed.), *De la Renaissance aux Lumières*, vol. 1, Paris 2005 (*Histoire du corps*), p. 247–317.

100 Mark MOTLEY, *Becoming a French Aristocrat. The Education of the Court Nobility, 1580–1715*, Princeton 1990.

101 François LORYOT, *Les fleurs des secretz moraux sur les passions du cœur humain*, Paris 1614, p. 537–538.

102 Pierre Coustel's »Règles de l'éducation des enfants« was reprinted as Pierre COUSTEL: *Traité de l'éducation chrétienne et littéraire propre à inspirer aux jeunes gens les sentiments d'une solide piété, & à leur donner le gout des belles-lettres*, 2 vols., Paris 1749. Quote is in vol. 1, p. 313. On the author, see Nicholas HAMMOND, *Fragmentary Voices. Memory and Education at Port-Royal*, Tübingen 2004, p. 59–68.

103 Eustache LE NOBLE, *L'École du monde, ou instruction d'un père à son fils, touchant la manière dont il faut vivre dans le monde*, Amsterdam [1698] 1709, vol. 4, p. 178.

Female virtues advocated by seventeenth-century religious authors appeared to be embodied as well, although they responded to an altogether different logic. To the male pursuit of agility and robustness, Jean Cordier's influential tract »The Holy family«, first published in 1643, opposed the display of modesty as the virtue that was most necessary to a woman, being the one »that holds the compass to find the excellent medium that leads to all other virtues«¹⁰⁴. Modesty, Cordier explained, »must act chiefly on the exterior« and govern all movements to avoid excess¹⁰⁵. Bodily control was supposed to extend from one's eyes to one's tongue, one's hands »and all the rest«, so that it became impossible for a woman to »laugh like a buffoon, jump like a tumbler or shout like a madman«¹⁰⁶. Such rigid prescriptions were promptly incorporated within the teachings of a growing number of religious schools all over the country. Largely run by nuns and catering to pupils from various social classes, these institutions represented the most common way for girls to acquire some form of education during the Ancien Régime¹⁰⁷. Surviving regulations appear to advocate, in Martine Sonnet's words, a veritable »apology of immobility«, according to which the body should be looked after whilst being constricted and hidden¹⁰⁸. The teaching nuns of the Community of Sainte-Anne in Paris encouraged their girls »to cultivate modesty in their gaze, movements, posture and habits, to keep their body straight and to be civil and honest in all their actions«¹⁰⁹. In the classroom, they were forbidden from climbing on or under their desks as well as sitting on the edge, lest they should fall immodestly; when seated instead »they should not move their head or feet, which is a sign of levity, and they should also keep their feet hidden under their skirts«¹¹⁰. Moreover, rigid instructions were issued to direct pupils' behaviour outside of the institution. The girls taught by the religious Ladies of the Cross were urged to spend the daily journey from home to the convent »looking down at their feet« and if the mud forced them to lift their skirts, they should do so »most discreetly«¹¹¹. Such injunctions were directed at girls who attended the convents' day schools and came from the urban lower classes. Other institutions offered board and lodging to more affluent pupils from the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. Founded in 1686 under the auspices of Madame de Maintenon, Louis XIV's last mistress and morganatic wife, the Maison royale de Saint-Louis at Saint-Cyr proposed itself as a model institution gathering girls of noble birth but reduced circumstances. A devout and well-educated woman, Madame de Maintenon intended for the students of Saint-Cyr to enjoy a better-structured and more useful education than that offered by a traditional religious school, without abandoning its strict discipline¹¹². When instructing the teaching nuns of Saint-Louis, the powerful patroness reminded them that »your *demoiselles* have infinitely more need to conduct themselves like good Chris-

104 Jean CORDIER, *La famille sainte*, Lyon, [1643] 1678, p. 179.

105 *Ibid.*

106 *Ibid.*

107 Jean PERREL, *Les Écoles de filles dans la France d'Ancien Régime*, in: *Historical Reflections* 7/2–3 (1980), p. 75–83; Elizabeth RAPLEY, *The Dévotes. Women and Church in Seventeenth Century France*, Montreal and London 1990.

108 Martine SONNET, *L'Éducation des filles au temps des Lumières*, Paris 1987, p. 150–156.

109 The »Règlement de la communauté des Filles de Sainte-Anne établies pour l'instruction des pauvres filles de la paroisse Saint-Roch à Paris« was written in 1698. Bibliothèque Mazarine, Ms 3309; quote at fols. 400–401.

110 *Ibid.*, fol. 1434.

111 *Instruction chrétienne des jeunes filles dressée en faveur de celles qui sont instruites dans la communauté des Dames de la Croix; pour y servir de lecture*, Paris 1734, p. 270–271. The community was established in the Parisian Faubourg Saint-Antoine during the first half of the seventeenth century. Their regulation was modelled on the work of the pedagogue Charles Gobinet (1614–1690).

112 Jacques PRÉVOT, *La Première institutrice de France. Madame de Maintenon*, Paris 1981.

tians and manage their family wisely, than acting like bluestockings (*savantes*) and heroines¹¹³. What good could too empowering an education be, if the ultimate destiny of women was, in her own words, to »hide, locking ourselves away in a convent or in our family«¹¹⁴.

Alongside regulations issued by specific institutions, pedagogic publications started to propose general educational models tailored to women. Mostly dealing with the improvement of the female mind through selective learning, such texts also considered how best to think about and look after the female body. In 1632, the Franciscan Jacques Du Bosc published his popular tract »The Honest woman«, where he delineated a female counterpart to the ideal »honest man« presented two years previously by the scholar Nicolas Faret¹¹⁵. The treatise started with a lengthy debate on what temperament was to be preferred between what he called a »cheerful« and »melancholic« humour. After presenting both sides of the argument, Du Bosc concluded that a woman should aspire to a balanced disposition and, should she be more inclined towards melancholy, he recommended she not forsake completely all cheerful diversions. After all, the author observed, »Elizabeth of Hungary did not disdain dancing, and her good humour did not prevent her from being canonised«¹¹⁶.

Whilst conforming to traditional understandings of human anatomy, Du Bosc's view of women's character was at the same time strikingly innovative. The author employed the same Galenic beliefs that were usually brought forth to explain female natural weakness to account for historical and legendary examples of *femmes fortes*. »Those who understand women's temperament«, he declared, »will admit that they have a marked disposition for true courage, being not so cold that they are insensible, or so hot that they are foolhardy«¹¹⁷. Du Bosc's interest in the body, however, did not extend beyond a rather elementary description of humoral flows and their moral effects. Neither did he consider how courage might be connected to corporeal force, nor did he offer advice on how to strengthen one's body. In his treatise, he did discuss corporeal qualities that he deemed important, namely beauty and grace. On these topics his arguments were limited to rather trite considerations on the necessity to achieve a correct balance between nature and artifice.

When articulating his own ideal of »The honest girl« (1640), the moralist writer François de Grenaille (1616–c.1680) showed a similar attitude to all matters corporeal¹¹⁸. After dedicating the first section of his treatise to the definition of all areas of knowledge suitable for women, the author turned his attention to moral considerations regarding female beauty¹¹⁹. Alongside love of gentleness and propriety, Grenaille regarded looking after one's body as a natural female attribute, so much so that »if girls renounced to taking care of their body, they would renounce

113 »Entretien VIII, juin 1696«, in Théophile LAVALLÉE (ed.), *Entretiens sur l'éducation des filles par Mme de Maintenon*, Paris 1854, p. 22; Dominique PICCO, *Les Dames de Saint-Louis, maitresses des demoiselles de Saint-Cyr*, in: Isabelle BROUARD-ARENS, Marie-Emmanuelle PLAGNOL-DIÉVAL (ed.), *Femmes éducatrices au siècle des Lumières*, Rennes 2007, p. 273–287.

114 Françoise d'Aubigné marquise de MAINTENON, *Conseils aux demoiselles pour leur conduite dans le monde*, ed. Théophile LAVALLÉE, Paris 1857, vol. 1, p. 450.

115 Sharon Diane NELL, Aurora WOLFGANG (ed.), *L'Honnête Femme. The Respectable Woman in Society and the New Collection of Letters and Responses by Contemporary Women*, Toronto 2014.

116 Jacques DU BOSQ, *L'Honneste femme*, Paris 1632, p. 16.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

118 After preparing for an ecclesiastic career, Grenaille moved to Paris where he became a prolific writer of moral tracts. He was also the official historiographer to Gaston d'Orléans, brother of Louis XIII.

119 On Grenaille's views on female education, see STANTON, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France* (as in n. 3), p. 95–96.

their very sex¹²⁰. His idea of body care consisted essentially in preserving one's *embonpoint*; that is, the ideal state of health to which each individual constitution was predisposed. Far from being connected to any medical prescription, Grenaille's advice to honest girls focused instead on the moral evils of tampering with nature through excessive ornamentation of body and dress. However, in a publication from the following year (1641), Grenaille ventured to express the first articulate reflection on the controversial role of exercise in a gentlewoman's routine. His treatise on »The Ladies' Pleasure« consisted in a collection of seven essays, each examining the positive and negative sides of what he considered a typically feminine and ladylike activity¹²¹. The chapter dedicated to »The Promenade« provided an opportunity for the author to engage with the medical side of a woman's nature. Grenaille's discourse was firmly grounded within a solid, albeit traditional, understanding of the non-naturals and echoed contemporary manuals on healthy living. He praised moderation above all things and hailed walking as the most pleasant of amusements and the most beneficial for mind and body, since the movement in addition to dispersing all polluting humours would also enliven the spirit¹²². Beneficial to all kinds of people, the promenade is deemed »especially necessary to women« in their constant attempt to preserve their natural balance (*embonpoint*). By expelling through exercise all the excess of phlegm produced by the body in a state of quiet, they avoid the risk of their whole complexion being corrupted¹²³. Grenaille did not challenge the basic tenet of women's corporeal inferiority; on the contrary he deemed them naturally weaker and softer than men. Because of this universally acknowledged truth, however, he declared that »they should take all the more care to fortify their constitution« through exercise¹²⁴. In addition to discussing its prophylactic function, Grenaille also suggested that walking could progressively improve a woman's constitution. The promenade, he wrote, »by agitating the body increases its strengths and, by keeping it exercised, renders it averse to inactivity«¹²⁵. This active regime is recommended for women's own sake as much as to enhance their reproductive ability, which is celebrated as their noblest attribute. In order to generate vigorous men, the author affirmed, »they should live like Amazons, whose bravery was equal to male heroes«¹²⁶.

Such warm praise of the promenade was immediately followed by a bitter invective, in which Grenaille appeared chiefly animated by moralistic zeal. He mainly objected to the fact that walking outdoors fostered dangerous familiarity between the sexes; »in letting themselves be seen«, he remarked scornfully, »women commit a sin similar to that of men who look at them lustfully«¹²⁷. Only at the end of his moralistic rant, the author made an attempt to back his criticism with medical considerations, intimating that exercise is not beneficial to the body since it upsets the humours and causes unnecessary excitement¹²⁸. Moreover, women are said to be particularly at risk since the heat generated by exercise endangered their natural moisture and the delicacy of their complexion. True to the Scholastic principles that informed his treatise, Grenaille did not refute one side of the argument in favour of the other. By laying out both, instead, he made manifest inherent paradoxes associated with contemporary understandings of female exercise. Indeed, while enjoying the pleasure of the promenade, women appeared to tread an extremely thin line between phlegmatic idleness and perilous overexertion.

120 François de GRENAILLE, *L'Honneste fille*, Paris 1640, p. 338.

121 Alessandro ARCANGELI, *Recreation in the Renaissance. Attitudes towards Leisure and Pastimes in European Culture*, c. 1425–1675, Basingstoke 2003, p. 93–100.

122 François de GRENAILLE, *Les plaisirs des Dames*, Paris 1641, p. 164–166.

123 *Ibid.*, p. 182–184.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

125 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

126 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 216.

128 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

The medical scruples that underpinned Grenaille's argument were shared by a number of intellectuals who published tracts on female education throughout the second half of the seventeenth century. While Grenaille endeavoured to present a balanced view, however, these pedagogues proposed a harder prescriptive line. In his »Treatise on the Education of Girls« (1687), François Fénelon (1651–1715) announced his conservative position by declaring that women »are made for moderate exercises«, since »their body, as well as their mind, is less strong and robust than men's«¹²⁹. »On the other hand«, Fénelon continued, »nature endowed them with industry, propriety, and a sense of economy so that they could find suitable occupation in their homes«¹³⁰. This opening statement is followed by an acknowledgement that women's »natural weakness« ought to be fought so that they could look after their households; indeed »the more they are weak, the more important it is to strengthen them«¹³¹. The worst risk a girl can incur, according to Fénelon, was to give herself to unchecked indolence, »getting used to sleep a third longer than it is necessary to preserve perfect health«¹³². Such prolonged languor »only makes her softer, more delicate and more exposed to the revolts of the body«, whereas »measured rest accompanied by orderly exercise renders a person cheerful, vigorous and robust«¹³³. Such professions appear at first to chime with Grenaille's praise of a fortifying walk. Yet the antidote to idleness Fénelon suggested was limited to an active engagement in domestic matters. The author's reticence to make any mention of actual physical exercise was doubtlessly motivated by his desire, expressed later in his treatise, that girls should learn to distinguish between body and soul, mortifying the former to extol the latter. Unlike Du Bosc, Fénelon feared a girl's natural familiarity with corporeal matters. »As for her body«, he commented, »she already knows too much about it; everything leads her to gratify it, adorn it, turn it into an idol, therefore it is most important to instil contempt, and expose her more positive side«¹³⁴.

Claude Fleury (1640–1723), author of a »Treatise on the choice and method of studies« published in 1686, proposed a similar assessment of female nature. Women, in his opinion, »are ordinarily endowed with less concentration, less patience to reason efficiently, less courage and firmness than men«¹³⁵. While their bodily constitution played a part in this state of inferiority, Fleury admitted, »a bad education undoubtedly played a bigger part«¹³⁶. His plans of reform of women's instruction, however, were limited to the mind. »As for the body«, he briefly noted, »there are no exercises which are suitable for them, apart from walking«¹³⁷.

One generation younger than Fénelon and Fleury, the educator and historian Charles Rollin (1661–1741) appeared to hold more progressive views concerning the training of girls' bodies¹³⁸. In his »Treatise on education« (1726) he clearly stated that »like there are studies which are apt to cultivate and refine the spirit, there are also exercises which are suitable to shape the body«

129 François de Salignac de la Mothe FÉNELON, *De l'éducation de filles*, Paris 1687, p. 4. On Fénelon's view on éducation, see STANTON, *The Dynamics of Gender in Early Modern France* (as in n. 3), p. 103–109.

130 *Ibid.*

131 *Ibid.*, p. 4–5.

132 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

133 *Ibid.*

134 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

135 Claude FLEURY, *Traité du choix et de la méthode des études*, Paris 1686, p. 265. On the author: Raymond E. WANNER, *Claude Fleury (1640–1723) as an Educational Historiographer and Thinker*, The Hague 1975.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 265–266.

137 *Ibid.*, p. 268.

138 On Rollin's life, see François LEBRUN, Jean QUENART, Marc VENARD, Louis-Henri PARIAS (ed.), *Histoire de l'enseignement et de l'éducation (1480–1789)*, vol. 2, Paris 2003, p. 513–514.

that ought not be neglected by any »Christian and reasonable« mother¹³⁹. The only form of exercise he deemed suitable for girls, however, was dancing – and only if learnt with the express aim to govern one's demeanour. »In order to achieve that«, he observed »it is sufficient to teach young people not to give themselves to a lax nonchalance that spoils and corrupts the whole attitude of the body; to keep straight, walk with a firm and uniform step« so that they could move easily in society¹⁴⁰. »There is no need for me to stop here and discuss«, the author concluded, »how anything beyond what I just marked could be dangerous for young girls, and lead to disastrous consequences«¹⁴¹.

Unlike his predecessors, Rollin presented exercise as an essential pedagogic tool able to mould the female body to achieve specific corporeal goals. Underpinning his prescriptions was the belief in an anatomical model no longer preoccupied with the internal balance of the humours as much as with the formation of a strong musculature. What appeared at risk of corruption was no longer a girl's *embonpoint*, but her posture. However fortified, straightened and controlled, the body described by Rollin was still female insofar as it was greatly limited in its scope for action. A girl could walk, but not run, and her training tended towards the performance of a range of activities suited to indoor spaces, such as coming in and out of a room or curtsying gracefully. Anything beyond this athletic perimeter was deemed disastrous as it challenged physiological boundaries that, despite their relocation from the humoral depths to the nervous surface, still stood solidly to separate the two sexes.

The Egalitarian View of François Poullain de La Barre

No true equality could be achieved until the anatomical barrier between the sexes remained unchallenged, a fact that was first recognised by François Poullain de La Barre. In his feminist writings, the Cartesian philosopher adopted a scientific outlook to prove that »being members of the same species«, men and women were equal and should be educated in the same manner¹⁴². While the core of his pedagogic theory focused on the equality of the mind, Poullain de La Barre did not neglect the corporeal component of the argument¹⁴³. His treatise »On the equality of the two sexes« (1673) included an entire section to the traditional question of male and female temperaments¹⁴⁴. Behind the familiar label, however, the author proposed a substantial reassessment of humoral understandings of gender. Medical attempts to prove that women's temperament is »completely different from ours, rendering them inferior in every aspect« were dismissed by the author as light conjectures¹⁴⁵. The true reason behind gender inequality, Poullain counterargued, were to be found in society's customs, since scientific evidence had shown that »men and women are similar almost in every aspect of their internal and external bodily constitution« and that »the natural functions, from which depend our conservation, proceed in the same manner«¹⁴⁶. Reproductive organs were indeed recognised as the one clear anatomical difference, but in the author's view this fact alone did not justify the common belief that one gender should be endowed with more or less strength and vigour than the other. On the contrary, experience showed that there are as many robust women as men and that men

139 Charles ROLLIN, *Traité des études*, Paris [1726] 1863, vol.1, p. 81.

140 *Ibid.*

141 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

142 »Avertissement«, in: François POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les mœurs*, Paris 1674, n. d.

143 Poullain's philosophy is discussed in Marie-Frédérique PELLEGRIN, *François Poullain de La Barre. Égalité, radicalité, modernité*, Paris 2017.

144 POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (as in n. 4), p. 175–178.

145 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

146 *Ibid.*



Fig. 1: Frontispiece to Madeleine de Scudéry, *Les Femmes illustres ou les Harangues héroïques*, (Paris, 1642). © Bibliothèque nationale de France



Fig. 2: Frontispiece to Pierre Petit, *Traité historique sur les Amazones* (Leide, 1718). © Bibliothèque nationale de France

brought up in idleness appeared often in worse physical shape¹⁴⁷. »The same goes for women«, the author continued, observing that »those that occupy themselves with laborious exercises are more robust than those gentlewomen who handle nothing more than a needle«¹⁴⁸. These observations led Poullain to claim that »if the two sexes were to exercise equally, one would perhaps acquire as much vigour as the other«¹⁴⁹. To support his theory, the author brought forth the historical example of women wrestling in ancient Greece and present-day Amazons in Central America¹⁵⁰. Poullain declared it useless to rely on bodily constitution to explain observable differences between the sexes, which, he argued, have been ascribed to temperament only for lack of a better explanation and the failure »to observe what can accomplish in us habit, exercise, education, and external conditions« dictated by society¹⁵¹.

Education was singled out as the most crucial factor to be considered since the one offered to women »could not be more different« from that of men, and greatly contributed to making them weak and helpless¹⁵². This was true for the mind as much as the body, since girls »do not partake in those exercises that confer dexterity and strength, both to attack and defend« themselves¹⁵³. While he raised the issue of girls' physical education, Poullain did not venture to put forward an alternative pedagogic plan. In his collection of dialogues »On the education of ladies« published the following year (1674), however, he posited that »to know the body« constituted an essential stepping stone to all forms of scientific understanding of the material world¹⁵⁴. Since humans, men and women alike, interact with the surrounding environment via physical perceptions and sensations, the body »acts like a pair of distance spectacles for the mind« putting in focus all external stimuli¹⁵⁵. To look into corporeal matters, therefore, did not represent a corrupting distraction from the research of spiritual truths, as Fénelon later put it, but a most beneficial and necessary complement. Thus invited to reflect upon their own corporeality, women would gain the self-empowering knowledge of their physical equality with men. They would also realise the crucial role of exercise to achieve their full anatomical potential and claim the hitherto-male prerogative of active and athletic strength. Poullain presented his thoughts on the equalising power of exercise in the form of a tantalising hypothesis, based on rational and scientific observation, but as yet lacking any concrete application in contemporary society. Seeking evidence to support his claim, he had to turn towards the well-known description of female exercise in Plato's Republic, adding then that »similar things have been reported concerning the Amazons in Central America«¹⁵⁶.

It is hard to determine Poullain's source of information, since many were the early modern travel narratives that told of encounters with communities of belligerent women in the New World¹⁵⁷. These were habitually referred to as Amazons and, like the mythical tribe roaming the steppes of Scythia, they too were said to be highly skilled warriors living in isolation from men. Similar communities were to be found, according to other accounts, in various regions of Africa and even within the European territories such as Bohemia and the Scandinavian lands¹⁵⁸. By depicting entire populations of physically strong women, these reports provided new sub-

147 Ibid., p. 177.

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid.

150 Ibid., p. 177–178.

151 Ibid., p. 187–188.

152 Ibid., p. 190.

153 Ibid., p. 196–197.

154 POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'éducation des dames* (as in n. 142), p. 274.

155 Ibid., p. 274–275.

156 POUILLAIN DE LA BARRE, *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (as in n. 4), p. 178.

157 Jean-Pierre SANCHEZ, *Le Mythe des amazones du Nouveau Monde*, Pamplona 1991.

158 Alain BERTRAND, *L'Archémythe des amazones*, Lille 2001, p. 61–82.

stance to the classical Amazonian myth. Considered together, these distinct narratives had the power to shake medical theories of sexual difference to the core. If Amazons had existed, and indeed still existed in the flesh, then women's bodies had indeed the potential to rival those of men. This notion, considered by Poullain in the limited space of a sentence, was soon to find a more articulate exposition.

The Amazon's Body Theorised: François de Chassepol and Pierre Petit

»A New History of the Amazons« published in 1678 by François de Chassepol constituted the first extensive study that aimed to give the legendary Amazons a tangible life through painstaking philological research¹⁵⁹. The result was a chronologically organised narrative tracing the history of the Scythian »Kingdom of Amazonia« together with a genealogy of its female rulers¹⁶⁰. The author's outlook appears strikingly original for its day in its rejection of the traditional image of Amazons as a bloodthirsty crowd in favour of a more sympathetic depiction of a sisterhood of truly valiant and honourable warriors¹⁶¹. Chassepol conveyed his thoughts on disparity between the sexes indirectly, within a long speech to the Amazons pronounced by their first queen Marthésie. In this eloquent oration, the speaker denounced how for centuries women had been »brought up in great softness, and barred from military exercises« by express design of men, who were afraid they might rebel to their domination¹⁶². To this end, she continued, they have been relegated to »activities that slacken the courage, anesthetise the mind and destroy the force of our temperament«¹⁶³. And yet, despite these precautions, women have managed to prove »through a great many beautiful actions« that their sex is »suited to the most laborious exercises, and able to succeed in the most daring enterprises«¹⁶⁴. These words echoed Poullain's contention that education rather than nature lay at the origin of gender inequality in society. While the scope of his research was limited to the study of one specific community of Amazons in the past, the author concluded by casting his gaze to the present day. »I am well aware«, Chassepol noted at the very end of his treatise, »that there are still women who bear this name and live more or less like those ancient warriors«¹⁶⁵.

Towards these modern Amazons was directed the attention of another author, the physician-turned-scholar Pierre Petit (1617–1687). Little is known of the life of this seventeenth-century intellectual, save that after completing his medical studies in Montpellier he moved back to the French capital. There he seems to have spent the rest of his life, first engaged as tutor to the sons of Guillaume de Lamoignon, Chief President of the Parliament of Paris, then living under the patronage of Aymar de Nicolai, President of the Chamber of Accounts. This privileged situation allowed Petit to fully dedicate himself to the pursuit of learning and the composition of literary and historical tracts in Latin. On rare occasions he still took part in medical

159 A similar albeit more modest attempt was made by the Lutheran theologian Cyriacus Spangenberg in late sixteenth-century Germany, see Helen WATANABE-O'KELLY, *Beauty or Beast? The Woman Warrior in the German Imagination from the Renaissance to the Present*, Oxford 2010, p. 45.

160 The treatise was published concurrently in Lyon and Paris, entitled alternatively »Histoire nouvelle des amazones« or simply »Histoire des amazones«. Little is known of the author, who claimed to have been inspired in the approaching of this topic by his patroness, Marie-Anne Mancini Duchess of Bouillon (1649–1714).

161 BERTRAND, *L'Archémythe des amazones* (as in n. 158), p. 151–154.

162 François de CHASSEPOL, *Histoire des amazones*, Paris 1678, p. 65.

163 *Ibid.*

164 *Ibid.*, p. 65–66.

165 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

debates, most famously in 1667 when he voiced his critique of the employment of blood transfusion as a cure¹⁶⁶. Towards the end of his life, Petit set out to demonstrate the reality of Amazons. Unlike Chassepol, he did not conceive his work as a piece of philological enquiry into the classical myth. On the contrary, he sought to produce a scientific explanation of the existence of Amazons in the present time. The fruit of Petit's labours, a »Dissertation on Amazons« in Latin, was first published in 1685 and then expanded into a new version, which appeared soon after the author's death two years later. Reprinted in 1712, the work was finally translated into French as the »Historical treatise of Amazons« in 1718 (fig. 2)¹⁶⁷. This title was partially truthful insofar as the initial and final section of the treatise did engage principally with antiquarian material. The central portion of the volume, however, was dedicated to proving »how it is not absurd that Amazons have been as it is said they were«¹⁶⁸. Put in simpler terms, Petit was determined to prove that a woman with the physical and mental characteristics of an Amazon could exist. Without pausing any longer on ancient testimonies, the author continued, it was time to consider »the thing itself, and see whether it exhibits any trait that is opposed to reason or to the laws of nature«¹⁶⁹. In this endeavour, Petit benefited from his unique background as he re-interpreted material from classical texts and travel accounts with the eye of the trained physician and the wisdom of an experienced pedagogue. The result was a medical study of the Amazon's complexion, explained mainly in light of two factors, namely physical surroundings and education (fig. 2).

Education, defined by Petit as a mixture of the nutrition and corporeal training children receive from an early age, was considered especially crucial to the formation of »the vigour and excellence of body and mind« possessed by Amazons¹⁷⁰. While previous authors had emphasised how female courage and force were to be interpreted in a moral and spiritual sense, Petit appeared keen to underline the necessary union of a strong body and a strong mind in the making of a real strong woman. In his opinion, what might strike at first as an exceptionally robust female constitution was simply the result of constant »exercises and labours both of mind and body«¹⁷¹. Refuting all sense of biological essentialism, he argued that it was through habit and the repeated performance of certain activities that men acquired a »new« and »masculine« nature. Forced to get used to the same exercises as men since their most tender youth, Amazons too had acquired »a magnanimous and generous spirit together with a robust and vigorous body«¹⁷². Maintaining such »an austere and harsh lifestyle«, the continual exercise of the hunt was sure to make women »enterprising and courageous beyond the reach of their sex«¹⁷³.

Petit proceeded then to buttress his theories on female education with specific references to philosophical and medical authorities. First, he discussed the well-known passage from book V of the Republic, in which Plato advocated that all corporeal exercises should be shared between the sexes, while preserving those differences that concern the reproductive faculty¹⁷⁴. Then he examined the work of Galen to put into question the belief in the inherently gendered characters of the body conceived in humoral terms. A careful reading of his tract »On the pulse« revealed that a person's temperament was not necessarily connected to sex; a woman might be naturally more bilious, that is hotter and drier, than a man and a man more naturally

166 See his tract »De nova Curandorum Morborum Ratione per Transfusionem Sanguinis«.

167 Pierre PETIT, *Traité historique sur les amazones*, Leiden 1718. On the work's genealogy, see BERTRAND, *L'Archémythe des amazones* (as in n. 158), p. 161–162.

168 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

169 *Ibid.*

170 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

171 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

172 *Ibid.*, p. 143–144.

173 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

174 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

phlegmatic¹⁷⁵. Moreover, other factors such as conditions of life and exercise could produce alterations in a person's constitution. A woman who »is often in the country, exposed to the elements, and takes a lot of exercise«, for example, will enjoy a stronger constitution than a man who »lives a delicate, idle and voluptuous life«¹⁷⁶. More generally, the author concluded, »if any woman should follow the same way of life usually adopted by men, it is plausible that, regardless of her natural temperament being more or less hot than a man's, she will acquire a constitution [...] little or not at all inferior in terms of heat and vigour«¹⁷⁷. This same fact that had been observed by Poullain as an experiential truth, Petit instead presented as a universal theory rooted in medical culture.

Whilst following in Poullain's footsteps, Petit moved more methodically as he discussed the importance of corporeal exercise to form courageous and robust women. Once again he turned first to Plato for support, pointing out how the philosopher's endorsement of female gymnastics was chiefly motivated by the fact that movement hardened the limbs, whereas idleness would make them weak and languid¹⁷⁸. A moderate amount of physical labour would also rouse women's fighting ardour without turning it into savage brutality. In his treatise »On Airs, Waters and Places«, Hippocrates too stated that exercise has the power to make men not only stronger but also more courageous¹⁷⁹. »But what good are authors' testimonies«, Petit then exclaimed, »when experience makes the truth almost palpable through clear and evident examples?« and invited to look at peasant women running in the streets and carrying heavy weights with as much agility and speed as men. »From this it is easy to understand«, the author concluded, »how women would be capable of doing all the things that men do if they were brought up and educated in the same manner«¹⁸⁰. After observing that children are naturally similar in their natural inclinations and that it is education that moulds their character according to sex, the author again noted »how there is little difference between peasant girls and women and their menfolk in the coarseness of their manners and their ability to withstand physical labour«¹⁸¹. Petit's Amazons were not to be found exclusively in faraway lands and history books; they roamed the streets of French towns, busy with their daily occupations. Less marvellous than the horsewomen of Scythia or the American warriors, these women offered a glaring, if somewhat mundane, example of the effects of a masculine corporeal training on a woman's body.

The benefits of an equal education being so manifest, Petit wondered why society had not seen fit to establish such custom. To provide an answer, the author assumed a misogynistic tone in striking contrast with his preceding reflections. Women's corporeal inferiority, he claimed, was a condition necessary to maintain harmony within the household. In the first place, husbands had enough troubles keeping their wives to their domestic duties as it was, in spite of their softer education. Should they be made »more robust and courageous through a harder and masculine training«, it was to be feared they would soon aspire to become »mistress of the house«¹⁸². Besides, he added, the same ardour that would make them more belligerent, would »suffocate in them any sense of shame«, thus making all women immodest and unfaithful to their husbands¹⁸³. To conclude, Petit proclaimed, »it is not only for the peace and quiet of the

175 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

176 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

177 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

178 *Ibid.*, p. 169–170.

179 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

180 *Ibid.*, p. 172–173.

181 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

182 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

183 *Ibid.*

home, but also for the sweetness and pleasure of life, that women should have a softer spirit and weaker body than men, following the order of nature¹⁸⁴.

Thus the march of Petit's Amazons came to an abrupt halt. Frightened by the possibility of female liberation going too far, the author retreated into the security of a natural order whose integrity and validity his own work had challenged. To break all harmony within the institution of family and society more broadly appeared too catastrophic a risk to be taken lightly. In pursuit of medical knowledge, however, Petit had ventured to lay bare the real and deep roots of gender inequality. Traditionally standing as an incontrovertible and divine truth inscribed in the weaker flesh of women, male superiority had instead been exposed as a man-made political strategy. Justified as a guarantee of social peace, corporeal disproportions between the sexes were enforced through specific pedagogic models centred on different conceptions of exercise. Preventive or curative, physical activity was presented to women exclusively as a medical measure to achieve a healthy equilibrium. For men, instead, athletic endeavours constituted a key instrument for corporeal improvement stimulated by assiduous and competitive training. It would take centuries for French society – and Western culture more generally – to reconcile medical views with moral scruples and start embracing more equalitarian views of athletic activity. Indeed the struggle for women's agency over their own body is still ongoing, and the acquisition of physical strength still plays a crucial part within feminist ideology¹⁸⁵. By employing exercise as a political tool, new generations of self-styled Amazons launch themselves in the joint pursuit of social emancipation and corporeal empowerment.

184 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

185 Shirley CASTELNUOVO, Sharon R. GUTHRIE, *Feminism and the Female Body. Liberating the Amazon within*, London 1998.