

## Preface

In the history of Western philosophy much has been written and studied concerning the nature and vocation of man. In contrast, it often appears the question of the nature and vocation of woman has been ignored. Indeed, it is the case that many famous male philosophers wrote little on the topic of women as interestingly distinct from men. Yet with just a little research, one finds that in every era of Western philosophy there were and are female thinkers who intentionally focused on the question of the nature and vocation of woman. Often these thinkers were seeking to understand and explain themselves. Often these women came late in their careers to the question but suddenly found it provocative and significant. Their works form a canon on the subject of woman.

As a philosopher, I myself came late to the recognition of the importance of the question of woman. As an undergraduate philosophy major and as a doctoral student in philosophy I was not introduced to the question or the treatment of that question in any significant way. In fact, as a student of philosophy it seemed to me as if women did not exist. Indeed, in the departments in which I studied, there was very little sexual diversity. Both my undergraduate and graduate institutions had only men teaching in their philosophy departments in the 1990s when I was there. The reading list for doctoral candidates at my university at the time did not include any works by women philosophers. I assumed that the scant number of women in the canon of philosophy was due to a scant number of women doing philosophy. I did not recognize that there was something missing in the canon I studied. There was something missing, however. What was missing was an entire field of inquiry—that of the nature of woman.

Thus, when I found myself in a job interview, at a small Wisconsin Catholic college for women, I was surprised by the first question I was

asked: how would I gear my teaching, research, and writing as a woman for women? The question seemed odd to me at the time. It felt as if I had been asked how I might teach as a person with brown eyes to others with brown eyes. That is how little I had thought through the issue at that point in my life. Even though I had always considered myself a feminist, someone who stands up for women, I had never deeply considered the question of what a woman is and what a woman needs in order to be supported. Somehow I blundered through an answer that did not derail the interview. Somehow I was hired. I was told that my first teaching assignment would be a course titled Women Philosophers. The committee assumed I could get a syllabus ready over the summer. I, of course, eager for a job, agreed that I could do so.

I spent that summer in the library reading about women philosophers, about the philosophy of women. I walked into the classroom hoping to teach what I had never been taught. Luckily, my students were up to the task of learning with me rather than from me. My first class on women philosophers changed me in a way that I had not expected. The class was my first experience in a classroom where men did not outnumber women. Indeed, there were only women. The students' comments and insights converted me to the position that the question of woman was exciting and important. They wanted to do their own research, and their work introduced me to a broader canon of thinkers. These were thinkers that my previous education had neglected. I realized that women had been doing philosophy since the dawn of Western intellectual history. I recognized that the discipline of women's studies had been a subcategory of philosophy for millennia.

The class became my most popular course offering. When people outside academia asked me about my work, they became most interested when I talked about my research on these women thinkers and their ideas. I began to be asked by church and civic groups to give talks on Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Christine de Pizan, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others. Inside academic circles I found that many groups were interested in these topics as well. This interest impressed me. This interest led me to take my syllabus, my discussions, and my lectures from the past sixteen years and use them to create a book that would let others share this interest. *Thinking Woman: A Philosophical Approach to the Quandary of Gender* is a book that is both a history of ideas and an invitation to join the philosophical dialogue about women. It is a vibrant dialogue; and I am happy to be part of it.