

AP European History/Spencer
Status of Women in Medieval Society

Christine de Pisan
The Book of the City of Ladies (1405)

Excerpts from [one text](#) provided by [Anne Kelsch](#) at the U. of North Dakota and [another](#) provided by [S. Spishak](#) at George Mason University.

As you read these excerpts, consider Christine's purpose in writing this. What do you think the status of women was in medieval society? Did women have access to education? How does Christine defend her position? What does this reveal about the time she was writing?

{1}One day as I was sitting alone in my study surrounded by books on all kinds of subjects, devoting myself to literary studies, my usual habit, my mind dwelt at length on the weighty opinions of various authors whom I had studied for a long time. I looked up from my book, having decided to leave such subtle questions in peace and to relax by reading some small book. By chance a strange volume came into my hands, not one of my own, but one which had been given to me along with some others. When I held it open and saw its title page that it was by Matheolus, I smiled, for though I had never seen it before, I had often heard that like books it discussed respect for women. I thought I would browse through it to amuse myself. I had not been reading for very long when my good mother called me to refresh myself with some supper, for it was evening. Intending to look at it the next day, I put it down. The next morning, again seated in my study as was my habit, I remembered wanting to examine this book by Matheolus. I started to read it and went on for a little while. Because the subject seemed to me not very pleasant for people who do not enjoy lies, and of no use in developing virtue or manners, given its lack of integrity in diction and theme, and after browsing here and there and reading the end, I put it down in order to turn my attention to more elevated and useful study. But just the sight of this book, even though it was of no authority, made me wonder how it happened that so many different men - and learned men among them - have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior. Not only one or two and not even just this Matheolus (for this book had a bad name anyways and was intended as a satire) but, more generally, from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators - it would take too long to mention their names - it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth. Thinking deeply about these matters, I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman and, similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes, who had graciously told me of their most private and intimate thoughts, hoping that I could judge impartially and in good conscience whether the testimony of so many notable men could be true. To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women. Yet I still argued vehemently against women, saying that it would be impossible that so many famous men - such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding, so clear-sighted in all things, as it seemed - could have spoken falsely on so many occasions that I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was. This reason alone, in short, made me conclude that, although my intellect did not perceive my own great faults and, likewise, those of other women because of its simpleness and ignorance, it was however truly fitting that such was the case. And so I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew. I was so transfixed in this line of thinking for such a long time that it seemed as if I were in a stupor. Like a gushing fountain, a series of authorities, whom I recalled one after another, came to mind, along with their opinions on this topic. And I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman, and I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have designed to make such an abominable

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work which, from what they say, is the vessel as well as the refuge and abode of every evil and vice. As I was thinking this, a great unhappiness and sadness welled up in my heart, for I detested myself and the entire feminine sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature and in my lament I spoke these words:

Oh, God, how can this be? For unless I stray from my faith, I must never doubt that your infinite wisdom and most perfect goodness ever created anything which was not good. Did You yourself not create woman in a very special way and since that time did You not give her all those inclinations which it please You for her to have? And how could it be that You could go wrong in anything? Yet look at all these accusations which have been judged, decided, and concluded against women. I do not know how to understand this repugnance. If it is so, fair Lord God, that in fact so many abominations abound in the female sex, for You Yourself say that the testimony of two or three witnesses lends credence, why shall I not doubt that this is true? Alas, God, why did You not let me be born in the world as a man, so that all my inclinations would be to serve You better, and so that I would not stray in anything and would be as perfect as a man is said to be? But since Your kindness has not been extended to me, then forgive my negligence in Your service, most fair Lord God, and may it not displease You, for the servant who receives fewer gifts from his lord is less obliged in his service.

I spoke these words to God in my lament and a great deal more for a very long time in sad reflections, and in my folly considered myself most unfortunate because God had made me inhabit a female body in this world.

The story continues in the form of allegory, as three women (Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice) come to instruct Christine and to show her how to build a city for virtuous women. As Lady Reason explains

{2} There is another greater and even more special reason for our coming which you will learn from our speeches: in fact we have come to vanquish from the world the same error into which you had fallen, so that from now on, ladies and all valiant women may have a refuge and defense against the various assailants, those ladies who have been abandoned for so long, exposed like a field without a surrounding hedge, without finding a champion to afford them an adequate defense, notwithstanding those noble men who are required by order of law to protect them, who by negligence and apathy have allowed them to be mistreated. It is no wonder then that their jealous enemies, those outrageous villains who have assailed them with various weapons, have been victorious in a war in which women have had no defense. Where is there a city so strong which could not be taken immediately if no resistance were forthcoming, or the law case, no matter how unjust, which was not won through the obstinance of someone pleading without opposition? And the simple, noble ladies, following the example of suffering god commands, have cheerfully suffered the great attacks which, both in the spoken and the written word, have been wrongfully and sinfully perpetrated against women by men who all the while appealed to God for the right to do so. Now it is time for their just cause to be taken from Pharaoh's hands, and for this reason, we three ladies who you see here, moved by pity, have come to you to announce a particular edifice built like a city wall, strongly constructed and well founded, which has been predestined and established by our aid and counsel for you to build, where no one will reside except all ladies of fame and women worthy of praise, for the walls of the city will be closed to those women who lack virtue. . . .

{3} "My lady, according to what I understand from you, woman is a most noble creature. But even so, Cicero says that a man should never serve any woman and that he who does so debases himself, for no man should ever serve anyone lower than him." She replied, "The man or the woman in whom resides greater virtue is the higher; neither the loftiness nor the sex, but in the perfection of conduct and virtues. And surely he is happy who serves the Virgin, who is above all the angels." "My lady, one of the Catos - who was such a great orator-- said, nevertheless, that if this world were without woman, we would

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converse with the gods." She replied, "You can now see the foolishness of the man who is considered wise, because, thanks to a woman, man reigns with God. And if anyone would say that man was banished because of Lady Eve, I tell you that he gained more through Mary than he lost through Eve when humanity was conjoined to the Godhead, which would never have taken place if Eve's misdeed had not occurred. Thus man and woman should be glad for this sin, through which such an honor has come about. For as low as human nature fell through this creature woman, was human nature lifted higher by this same creature. And as for conversing with the gods, as this Cato has said, if there had been no woman, he spoke truer than he knew, for he was a pagan, and among those of this belief, gods were thought to reside in Hell as well as in Heaven, that is, the devils whom they called the gods of Hell - so that it is no lie that these gods would have conversed with men, if Mary had not lived."

Christine and Lady Reason discuss women's education.

⁽⁴⁾Christine, spoke, "My lady, I realize that women have accomplished many good things and that even if evil women have done evil, it seems to me, nevertheless, that the benefits accrued and still accruing because of good women-particularly the wise and literary ones and those educated in the natural sciences whom I mentioned above-outweigh the evil. Therefore, I am amazed by the opinion of some men who claim that they do not want their daughters, wives, or kinswomen to be educated because their mores would be ruined as a result." She responded, Here you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and that these men are wrong. For it must not be presumed that mores necessarily grow worse from knowing the moral sciences, which teach the virtues, indeed, there is not the slightest doubt that moral education amends and ennobles them. How could anyone think or believe that whoever follows good teaching or doctrine is the worse for it? Such an opinion cannot be expressed or maintained. . . .

⁽⁵⁾To speak of more recent times, without searching for examples in ancient history, Giovanni Andrea, a solemn law professor in Bologna not quite sixty years ago, was not of the opinion that it was bad for women to be educated. He had a fair and good daughter, named Novella, who was educated in the law to such an advanced degree that when he was occupied by some task and not at leisure to present his lectures to his students, he would send Novella, his daughter, in his place to lecture to the students from his chair. And to prevent her beauty from distracting the concentration of her audience, she had a little curtain drawn in front of her. In this manner she could on occasion supplement and lighten her father's occupation. He loved her so much that, to commemorate her name, he wrote a book of remarkable lectures on the law which he entitled *Novella super Decretalium*, after his daughter's name. . . .

⁽⁶⁾Thus, not all men (and especially the wisest) share the opinion that it is bad for women to be educated. But it is very true that many foolish men have claimed this because it displeased them that women knew more than they did. Your father, who was a great scientist and philosopher, did not believe that women were worth less by knowing science; rather, as you know, he took great pleasure from seeing your inclination to learning. The feminine opinion of your mother, however, who wished to keep you busy with spinning and silly girlishness, following the common custom of women, was the major obstacle to your being more involved in the sciences. But just as the proverb already mentioned above says, No one can take away what Nature has given, your mother could not hinder in you the feeling for the sciences which you, through natural inclination, had nevertheless gathered together in little droplets. I am sure that, on account of these things, you do not think you are worth less but rather that you consider it a great treasure for yourself; and you doubtless have reason to. And Christine, replied to all of this, "Indeed, my lady, what you say is as true as the Lord's Prayer." . . .

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Lady Reason explains the causes of misogyny.

{7}Lady Reason explains that some men who blame women do it with good intentions, though good intentions are no excuse for error. Others blame them because of their own vices, others because of the infirmity of their own bodies, others by pure jealousy, others still because they like to slander. Some, finally, eager to show that they have read a lot, take their stand on what they find in books and simply quote familiar authors, repeating what has been said before.

{8}By those who do it because of their own vices I mean those men who dissipated their youth in debauchery and dedicated themselves to promiscuity. The great number of their adventures has made them rogues. Grown old in sin, they spend their time regretting the transgressions of their youth -- the more so since Nature prevents them from slaking their impotent desires. They purge their bile by denigrating women, thinking thus to disgust others from enjoying what they cannot enjoy.

{9}Those motivated by the infirmity of their bodies are cripples with misshapen bodies and crooked limbs. Their minds are malicious and sharp, and they have no other means of vengeance for the misery of their impotence than to blame those [women] who bring gladness to others...

{10}Those who blame women by jealousy are unworthy men who, having known or met many women of greater intelligence or nobler heart than theirs, have conceived bitterness and rancor...

{11}As for those who are scandal-mongers by nature, it is not surprising that they slander women, when they speak ill of everyone. Yet I assure you that every man who takes pleasure in vilifying women has an abject heart, for he acts against Reason and against Nature because there is no bird or beast that does not naturally seek out its other half, that is to say the female. It is thus unnatural for a reasonable man to do the contrary. . . .

Christine and Lady Reason discuss the inventions and other advantages women have given humanity.

{12}And was there ever a man who did more for humanity than the noble queen Ceres ... who brought the barbarian nomads who dwelt in the forests, without faith or law, like savage beasts to come fill towns and cities where now they live respectful of the law? She provided them with better food than the acorns and crab apples that they used to eat: wheat, corn, foods that make the body more beautiful, the complexion more radiant, the limbs stronger and more agile, for they are more substantial and better suited to the needs of the human race. What is more worthy than to develop a land filled with thistles, thorn bushes and wild trees, to till it and sow it and turn wild heath to cultivated fields? Human nature was thus enriched by this woman who carried it from barbarous wildness to orderly society, rescuing these lazy nomads from gloomy ignorance and opening access to the highest forms of thought and the noblest occupations.

{13}Isis did the same for crops. Who can detail the good she brought humanity by teaching it to graft fine fruit trees and to husband the good plants appropriate to human sustenance?

{14}And then Minerva! ... People went clad in skins and she provided woolen garments; people carried their goods in their arms and she invented the art of building carts and chariots, relieving humanity of that burden; she taught noble knights how to manufacture coats of mail, so that their bodies should be

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better protected in war -- a handsomer, nobler, more solid armor than the leather jerkins they had before that!

{15} Then I said to her: Ah! My Lady! To hear you, I realize more than ever how great is the ignorance and the ingratitude of all those men who speak so much ill of women! I already believed that having had a mother and having experienced the services that women normally provide to men would be sufficient to still their mischievous tongues. But I see now that women have overwhelmed them with gifts, and continue bounteous with their blessings. Let them shut up! Let them henceforth be silent, those clerks who speak ill of women! Let all their accomplices and allies who speak ill of women in their writings or poems hold their tongues. Let them lower their eyes in shame to have dared lie so much in their books, when one sees that the truth goes counter to what they say...

{16} And let noble knights, many of whom speak ill of women, hold their tongues, knowing that it is to a woman that they owe armor, the art of war and of marshalling armies, that profession of arms of which they are so proud. And generally, when one sees men living on bread and dwelling in civilized towns subject to civil law, when they work their fields, how can one in view of so many good turns condemn and despise women the way so many do? For it was women -- Minerva, Ceres, Isis -- who brought them all those useful things that they enjoy all their lives and that they will always enjoy. Are these things insignificant? Not at all, My Lady, and it seems to me that not the philosophy of Aristotle -- so useful and so highly praised, and rightly too! -- nor all other philosophies that ever existed, ever brought or ever will bring so many advantages to humanity as the inventions that we owe to the spirit of these women.
