

*Woman Defamed and
Woman Defended*

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MEDIEVAL TEXTS

Edited by

ALCUIN BLAMIRES

with

KAREN PRATT and C. W. MARX

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St THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-74)

FROM THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE**

The Aristotelian equation between woman and 'matter' appealed to St Thomas⁸⁴ because it explained why Christ, though born of woman, was not a recipient of Original Sin. That was transmitted always by the active, formative seed of the male—but Christ had no human father.⁸⁵ In the *Summa*, however, the Aristotelian position is most concisely recapitulated in answering the question, Should one love one's mother more than one's father?

1 (II. ii. 26. 10: Reply) It is the father who ought to be loved more than the mother. For one's father and mother are loved as principles in our natural origin. But the father, as the active partner, is a principle in a higher way than the mother, who supplies the passive or material element. And so, speaking *per se*, the father should be loved the more.

2 Hence: (1) In human generation, the mother provides the matter of the body which, however, is still unformed, and receives its form only by means of the power which is contained in the father's seed.

⁸³ Cf. the father as 'cause' in Isidore 3 above.

* Tr. R. J. Batten OP, *St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*, xxxiv (London: Blackfriars, in conjunction with Eyre & Spottiswoode; and New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 149. © Blackfriars 1975. Reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press.

⁸⁴ See further the Aquinas section in Ch. 3.

⁸⁵ Børresen 1981, 219-22; Aquinas, *S. Th.* III. Q. 32 art. 4, 'whether the Virgin played any active part in the conception of Christ's body'.

St AUGUSTINE (354–430)

The influence of St Augustine's teaching in western Christendom was enormous for well over a thousand years. He was by no means a fanatical ascetic, since he wrote constructively on marriage and strongly defended the inherent good of the physical human body against the Manichaeans. Nevertheless, he was appalled by the uncontrollability, or 'insubordination', of sexual arousal, something visited upon humanity with a kind of poetic justice immediately after the Fall, he thought.⁹⁷ Before his own conversion Augustine had a common-law wife for years, though she had to be sent away when his mother planned (futilely, it turned out) a marriage for him. After his conversion he claimed that the recollection of sexual desire now horrified him, and that he had ruled out marriage because a man's mind is 'cast out of its citadel' by 'female blandishments and intimate contact'.⁹⁸ Possibly his ideas on sexuality were coloured by his own life as one 'who never married and whose experience of sexual pleasure was illicit and guilt-provoking'.⁹⁹

Augustine's specific doctrines on women were relatively more neutral and sophisticated than those of some of the Fathers, even though he envisaged for her a secondary ranking in the simple hierarchy, the 'natural order observed among men, that women should serve men, and children their parents, because it is just that the weaker mind should serve the stronger'.¹⁰⁰ Among other aspects, he was concerned with fine-tuning the debate as to whether woman was or wasn't 'in God's image'—both at once, in his

⁹⁴ I Cor. 6: 16.

⁹⁵ A reputable Roman jurist.

⁹⁶ Resistance to the 'double standard' can also be found in Chrysostom, *Homily 5 on I Thessalonians* and *Homily 19 on I Corinthians* (Clark 1983, 73-6); in Augustine's *On Adulterous Marriages* (Huegelmeier 1955, 108-9) and in his sermon *De decem cordis*, recapitulated in *Dives and Pauper* (see Ch. 8). Further discussion in Ch. 4, Andreas 1; Ch. 8, S. *Passion* 2; and Ch. 9, *City* 14.

⁹⁷ Pagels 1990, 110-12, 140-1; and Brown 1988, 406-8, 416-19.

⁹⁸ *Soliloquies* i. 10.17, in Augustine 1953, 33-4.

⁹⁹ Pagels 1990, 141. Such views are challenged in Truax 1990.

¹⁰⁰ See Ch. 3 below, Gratian 3.

opinion, thanks to a subtle conception of her as, under her physical aspect, symbolizing (without quite *constituting*) an inferior, sense-oriented dimension of humankind.¹⁰¹ His attitude to Eve was not shrill, but insidiously condescending nevertheless in the underlying opinion that Adam cannot seriously have shared her credulity in the face of the serpent's claims. On the other hand, he staunchly affirmed the bodily resurrection of woman *as* woman. Moreover, he strongly endorsed the objections of predecessors such as Chrysostom and Jerome to the 'double standard' whereby husbands claimed a sexual licence which they would not dream of allowing to their wives.¹⁰² The catch was that he based his objection on the 'superior' male's obligation to set a good example to the 'weaker' sex. Nevertheless, his strictures against male hypocrisy made him a useful ally in the defence of women throughout the Middle Ages, as is demonstrated by the full report of his argument in *Dives and Pauper* (Chapter 8).

Hierarchy of Man and Woman in Creation

FROM *CONFESSIONS** (*CONFESSIONES*: AD 398)

Near the end of the book comes a hymn of thanks for the created world.

I (XIII. 32) And finally we see man, made in your image and likeness, ruling over all the irrational animals for the very reason that he was made in your image and resembles you, that is, because he has the power of reason and understanding. And just as in man's soul there are two forces, one which is dominant because it deliberates and one which obeys because it is subject to such guidance, in the same way, in the physical sense, woman has been made for man. In her mind and in her rational intelligence she has a nature the equal of man's, but in sex she is physically subject to him in the same way as our natural impulses need to be subjected to the reasoning power of the mind, in order that the actions to which they lead may be inspired by the principles of good conduct.

¹⁰¹ See Børresen 1981, 21–30; and Augustine, *De Trinitate* XII.

¹⁰² See Jerome 26 and n. above.

* Tr. R. S. Pine-Coffin, *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 344. © R. S. Pine-Coffin, 1961. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd. Latin text in *PL* 32.659–868.

FROM THE LITERAL MEANING OF GENESIS* (DE GENESI
AD LITTERAM: 401-16)

2 (IX. 5) Now, if the woman was not made for the man to be his helper in begetting children, in what was she to help him? She was not to till the earth with him, for there was not yet any toil to make help necessary. If there were any such need, a male helper would be better, and the same could be said of the comfort of another's presence if Adam were perhaps weary of solitude. How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together. And if they had to make an arrangement in their common life for one to command and the other to obey in order to make sure that opposing wills would not disrupt the peace of the household, there would have been proper rank to assure this, since one would be created first and the other second, and this would be further reinforced if the second were made from the first, as was the case with the woman. Surely no one will say that God was able to make from the rib of the man only a woman and not also a man if He had wished to do so. Consequently, I do not see in what sense the woman was made as a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children.

In subsequent discussion of the Fall, Augustine suggests that Eve's explicit consciousness of the prohibition made her transgression the more inexcusable. He also argues that she would not have been swayed by the serpent's temptation had there not already been some streak of presumption in her. Her punishment prompts Augustine to ponder the nature of her 'servitude'.

3 (XI. 37) We must give consideration to the statement, 'And you shall be subject to your husband, and he shall rule over you',¹⁰³ to see how it can be understood in the proper sense. For we must believe that even before her sin woman had been made to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him. But we can with reason understand that the servitude meant in these words is that in which there is a condition similar to that of slavery rather than a bond of love (so that the servitude by which men later began to be

* Tr. John Hammond Taylor, SJ, *St Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 2 vols., Ancient Christian Writers, no. 42 (New York and Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, 1982), ii, 75, 170-1, 175-6. © 1982 by Revd. Johannes Quasten, Revd. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, and Thomas C. Lawler. Latin text in *PL* 34.245-486.

¹⁰³ Gen. 3: 16.

slaves to other men obviously has its origin in punishment for sin). St Paul says, 'Through love serve one another.'¹⁰⁴ But by no means would he say, 'Have dominion over one another.' Hence married persons through love can serve one another, but St Paul does not permit a woman to rule over a man.¹⁰⁵ The sentence pronounced by God gave this power rather to man; and it is not by her nature but rather by her sin that woman deserved to have her husband for a master.¹⁰⁶ But if this order is not maintained, nature will be corrupted still more, and sin will be increased.

Augustine offers a final reflection on the Fall.

4 (XI. 42) . . . If Adam was a spiritual man, in mind though not in body, how could he have believed what was said through the serpent, namely, that God forbade them to eat of the fruit of that one tree because He knew that if they did they would be gods in their knowledge of good and evil? As if the Creator would grudge so great a good to His creatures! It is surely strange if a man endowed with a spiritual mind could have believed this. Was it because the man would not have been able to believe this that the woman was employed on the supposition that she had limited understanding, and also perhaps that she was living according to the spirit of the flesh and not according to the spirit of the mind?

5 Is this the reason that St Paul does not attribute the image of God to her? For he says, 'A man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.'¹⁰⁷ This is not to say that the mind of woman is unable to receive that same image, for in that grace St Paul says we are neither male nor female.¹⁰⁸ But perhaps the woman had not yet received the gift of the knowledge of God, but under the direction and tutelage of her husband she was to acquire it gradually. It is not without reason that St Paul said, 'For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not seduced but the woman was seduced and fell into sin.'¹⁰⁹ In other words, it was through her that man sinned. For Paul calls him a sinner also when he says, 'in the likeness of the sin of Adam, who is a type of the One to come'.¹¹⁰ But he says that Adam was not seduced.

¹⁰⁴ Gal. 5: 13.

¹⁰⁵ I Tim. 2: 12.

¹⁰⁶ The sense appears to be that woman's subjection symbolizes the beginning of human domination generally and that the Fall rendered more extreme the submission wherein she already—but in a 'bond of love'—served man: cf. Ch. 3, Aquinas 2.

¹⁰⁷ I Cor. 11: 7.

¹⁰⁸ Gal. 3: 28.

¹⁰⁹ I Tim. 2: 13-14.

¹¹⁰ Rom. 5: 14.

In fact, Adam under interrogation did not say, 'The woman whom Thou gavest to be my companion seduced me and I ate'; but, 'She gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.' On the other hand, the woman said, 'The Serpent seduced me.'

6 Can we imagine that Solomon, a man of incredible wisdom, believed that there was any advantage in the worship of idols? But he was unable to resist the love of women drawing him into this evil. . . .¹¹¹ So it was in the case of Adam. After the woman had been seduced and had eaten of the forbidden fruit and had given Adam some to eat with her, he did not wish to make her unhappy, fearing she would waste away without his support, alienated from his affections, and that this dissension would be her death. He was not overcome by the concupiscence of the flesh . . . but by the sort of attachment and affection by which it often happens that we offend God while we try to keep the friendship of men. . . . I do not think that the wiles of the serpent by which the woman was seduced could have been in any way the means of his seduction.

Women at the Resurrection of the Body

FROM *CITY OF GOD** (*DE CIVITATE DEI*: 4 I 2-27)

7 (XXII. 17) Because of these sayings, 'Until we reach the perfection of manhood, the stature of the full maturity of Christ',¹¹² and 'Being shaped into the likeness of God's Son',¹¹³ some people suppose that women will not keep their sex at the resurrection; but, they say, they will all rise again as men, since God made man out of clay, and woman out of man. For my part, I feel that theirs is the more sensible opinion who have no doubt that there will be both sexes in the resurrection. For in that life there will be no sexual lust, which is the cause of shame. For the first human beings, before their sin, 'were naked, the man and the woman, and they were not ashamed'.¹¹⁴

8 Thus, while all defects will be removed from those bodies, their essential nature will be preserved. Now a woman's sex is not a defect: it is natural. And in the resurrection it will be free of the necessity of

¹¹¹ 3 Kgs. II: 1-11.

* Tr. Henry Bettenson, *St Augustine: City of God* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), 1057-8. © Henry Bettenson 1972. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd. Latin text in CCSL 47-8 or PL 41.13-804.

¹¹² Eph. 4: 13; cf. the use of this in Ambrose 6 above.

¹¹³ Rom. 8: 29.

¹¹⁴ Gen. 2: 21.

intercourse and childbirth. However, the female organs will not subserve their former use; they will be part of a new beauty, which will not excite the lust of the beholder—there will be no lust in that life—but will arouse the praises of God for His wisdom and compassion, in that He not only created out of nothing but freed from corruption that which He had created.

9 He who established the two sexes will restore them both. And indeed, Jesus was questioned by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection; and they asked to which of seven brothers a wife would belong, to whom they had all been married . . . ; and Jesus replied . . . 'in the resurrected life men and women do not marry; they are like the angels of God in heaven'.¹¹⁵ That is, 'they are like them in immortality and felicity, not in body. . . .' Thus Christ denies the existence of marriage in the resurrected life; He does not deny the existence of women in heaven.

¹¹⁵ Matt. 22: 29 ff.

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO (1313-1375)

FROM *THE CORBACCIO** (*IL CORBACCIO: C.1355*)

Boccaccio found women a constantly interesting topic. He wrote a whole volume *On Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*), a kind of biographical dictionary of celebrated women in pagan culture. In his romances there is often a Don Juanism in his attitude, though—a combination of admiration and desire with rakish cynicism. *The Corbaccio* (meaning perhaps 'Evil Crow', alluding to a fable in which the bird attempts to hide its ugliness beneath peacock's feathers) is no romance, but a mordant experiment in unalloyed contempt, deeply indebted to Juvenal's *Satire VI* but drawing besides on a wide harvest of antifeminist texts. Boccaccio had stored them away in a personal anthology or *florilegium* known as the *Zibaldone laurenziano*, begun before 1350. *Il Corbaccio* adopts the structure of a medieval literary dream-vision, parodying that form's presentation of enlightenment by an authority figure. Its narrator, crushed by a fantasy of unfulfilled love for a widow, dreams of a desolate purgatorial landscape where an incongruously grave and Dantesque personage, the Spirit of her former husband, exposes this fantasy by savagely de-romanticizing women in general and the widow in particular.⁵³ It is a classic case of a fiction in which woman is the absent centre of discussion and target of verbal abuse thinly veneered with wit. It is also a classic development of the subcategory of antifeminism aimed at the figure of the old woman or widow.

⁵³ Cf. Ch. 4, *Andreas* 13

⁵⁴ Not 'Solomon', but Micheas 7: 5.

* Tr. Anthony K. Cassell, *The Corbaccio, Giovanni Boccaccio* (Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1975). Reprinted by permission of the translator: © Anthony Cassell. Italian text: Nurmela 1968.

⁵⁵ The germ of this could be the 'Phoroneus' anecdote, that only husbands know why one should not marry; see RR 12; and Ch. 4, Map 21.

Boccaccio's strategy gives misogynistic conventions a double run, because the Spirit (i) argues that for the narrator to subject himself to the love of any woman is a debasement of his masculine and intellectual excellence because women *en bloc* are vile and inferior beings; and (ii) disabuses the narrator of his awe of the widow's personality by depicting the vileness of this woman in particular from a perspective of extreme, Swiftian proximity. The latter tactic perhaps represents (no less than the monologue of *Le Jaloux* by Jean de Meun) an attempt to update and give individual colour to the conventional invective. It has also been thought to be calculatedly antithetical to Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Readings from both (i) and (ii) are given below.

Uncleanness

I 'Your studies should have shown you (and did show you, had you wished to see it) what women are. Of these a great many call themselves and have themselves called "ladies", although very few are found among them.⁵⁶ A woman is an imperfect creature excited by a thousand foul passions,⁵⁷ abominable even to remember, let alone to speak of. If men considered this as they should, they would go to them in the same way and with the same desire and delight with which they go to any other natural and inevitable necessity; just as they hastily flee those places when their superfluous burden is released, so they would flee women, after they have done their duty to restore deficient human progeny (as do all other creatures who are far wiser in this than men!).⁵⁸ No other creature is less clean than woman: the pig, even when he is most wallowed in mud, is not as foul as they. If perhaps someone would deny this, let him consider their childbearing; let him search the secret places where they in shame hide the horrible instruments they employ to take away their superfluous humours. But let us pass over whatever has to do with this subject. Since they are very well aware of it, they secretly consider any man a fool who loves them, desires them, or follows them; and they also know how to hide it in such a way that it is neither known nor believed by many stupid men who consider only the outer shell; moreover, there are those who, while well knowing it, dare to say that they like it, and that they would do, and indeed do, thus and such. These are certainly not to be numbered among men!'

The dead husband briefly sketches the 'traps' of beautification by which women 'hook' the men they marry, then seize control.

⁵⁶ Distinguishing between *femmina* and *donna*.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ch. 9, *Quarrel* 2.

⁵⁸ A medieval commonplace, found also e.g. in Langland, *Piers Plowman*, 'B' xi. 334-43. See Ch. 8, *S. Passion* 4, for an antithetical argument.

Gold-digging

5 'Let us consider to what degradation they subject themselves in order to increase their dowries a little. They will refuse as a husband no slobbering old man with rheumy eyes and trembling hands and head, as long as they hear that he is rich, since they are certain that they will be widows within a short time, and since he does not have to satisfy them in the nest. Nor are they ashamed to submit, offer, and allow their limbs, hair, and face (made up with so much care), their crowns, graceful garlands, velvets, cloths of gold, their many ornaments, necklaces, trifles, and such dainties to be fondled by the paralytic hands and toothless, slavering, fetid mouth—and this is far worse—of him whom they believe they can rob.⁶⁸ If his already dwindling nature grants him children, he has them in this way. If not, he cannot for this reason die without heirs! Others come, who make her belly swell; and even if nature has made it sterile, spurious pregnancies give him children so that, as a widow, she may longer live in lecherous pleasures at the expense of her ward.⁶⁹ Only fortune-tellers, flatterers, quacks, and groping fondlers in whom they take delight make them not merely courteous but prodigal; for these, women never show the least caution, thrift, or avarice.' . . .

Here are interjected miscellaneous brief charges: caprice, presumption, indulgence of their will; and that women are loud-mouthed.

'Knowledge' and 'Tuition'

6 'Wretched students suffer cold, fasting, and vigils, and after many years they find that they have learned very little. Women, even if they remain in church one morning just long enough to hear Mass, know how the firmament turns; how many stars there are in the sky and how big they are; what the course of the sun and the planets is; how thunder, lightning, hail, rainbows, and other things are created in the air; how the sea ebbs and flows; and how the land produces fruit. They know what is going on in India and Spain; how the homes of the Ethiopians are made, and where the source of the Nile is found; and whether crystal is generated in the north from ice or from something else; with whom their neighbour slept; by whom that

⁶⁸ This charge of deliberately marrying senile men (possibly true of May in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*: Mann 1991, 68) is likely to remind the reader of the *predicament* of women married off to the elderly.

⁶⁹ On illegitimate offspring cf. Ch. 4, *Ag. Marr.* L6-L7; *Math.* II. 3325-7; *Juv. Satire* VI, 76-7, 598-601 (followed by a passage on spurious pregnancies, 602-9).

other woman is pregnant and in what month she is to give birth; and how many lovers that other has, and who sent her the ring and who the belt; and how many eggs their neighbour's hen lays a year; and how many spindles she uses to spin an ounce of linen; and, in brief, they return fully informed about all that the Trojans or the Greeks or the Romans ever did.⁷⁰ If they cannot find anyone else to lend them an ear, they chatter incessantly with the maid, the baker's wife, the green-grocer's wife, or the washerwoman, and become greatly put out if they are reprov'd for talking to any of them.

7 'It is true that from this so sudden and divinely inspired knowledge of theirs springs an excellent doctrine for their daughters. They teach them all how to rob their husbands, how to receive love letters and how to answer them, how to bring their lovers into the house, how to feign illness so that their husbands will leave the bed free for them, and many other evils. He who believes that any mother delights in having a daughter more honest or virtuous than herself is a fool. It does not matter if they must go to their neighbours to ask for a lie, a perjured oath, an evil deed, a thousand feigned sighs, or a hundred thousand false tears, for when they are necessary, women lend them. God knows where they keep them so ready and swift as they do for their every whim (for, as far as I am concerned, I could never begin to guess)!⁷¹

8 'It is true, of course, that they are willing to let one of their defects be proven, and especially those that others see with their very own eyes,⁷² and don't they have ready their "It wasn't like that! You're lying in your teeth! You're seeing things! You've left your brain at the menders! Try drinking less! You don't know where you are! Are you all right in the head? Even without a fever you're raving and rambling on nonsensically", and other such little barbed words of theirs? If they say they have seen an ass fly, after many arguments to the contrary you will have to give in entirely; if not, mortal enmity, treachery, and hatred will immediately take the field. So brazen are they that they say straight off to anyone who belittles their intellect one jot, "And weren't the Sibyls wise?"—just as if every one of them should be the eleventh! It is a wondrous thing that, in so many

⁷⁰ This passage is closely modelled on a caricature in *Juv. Satire VI*, 402–12.

⁷¹ Cf. *RR 19* above, and the common source in *Juv. Satire VI*, 231–41. Boccaccio adds the charge of lying (ubiquitous but cf. esp. *Ch. 4*, *Andreas 19*) and ready tears (cf. *Ch. 1*, *Ovid 5*; and *RR 13*, 367–74).

⁷² Cf. *RR 24*.

thousands of years that have passed since the world was made, amid so great a multitude as has been that of the feminine sex, only ten wise and celebrated women have been found among them; and each one thinks she is either one of them or worthy to be numbered among them. Among their other vanities, when they wish to exalt themselves far above men, they say that all good things are of the feminine gender: the stars, planets, Muses, virtues, and riches. If it weren't indecent, to this you would only want to reply, "It's quite true they're all feminine, but they don't piss!"⁷³

They also boast of the Virgin Mary and the female saints, while being totally unable to emulate them in chastity.⁷⁴ (Nature did a disservice to the saints anyway, in subjecting such 'virile', 'constant' hearts within a 'vile' sex.) The Spirit suggests that, although he has not exhausted the criticisms that could be levelled, he has said enough. But women would never acknowledge these defects: they would attribute his attitude to homosexuality.⁷⁵

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN (1365–c.1430)

Christine de Pizan was born in Italy but brought up in cultured circles at the court of Charles V of France, where her father was appointed as astrologer. He was a well-read man, and according to Christine he took an unusually positive view (for its time) of her own wish to develop her intellectual gifts; her mother on the other hand sought in vain to mould her more conventionally—'with spinning and silly girlishness'.¹ Married at fifteen, Christine was fortunate that her husband further encouraged her literary talents, for these were to stand her in good stead when she lost both him and her father and had to support her three children after 1389. Her literary output covered some forty years. It was immense and wide-ranging, and it was rather remarkable for the extent to which some of it took issue with the disparagement of women. People have argued that she cannot properly be regarded as a forerunner of modern feminism, because she was too committed to conservative, quiescent ideals of womanly decorum.² Moreover, the present anthology shows how she availed herself of certain defence-of-women arguments which were not new, for they had long been in circulation—among men. In particular, she owed a substantial debt, without acknowledging it, to Jehan Le Fèvre's *Livre de Leesce*. Notwithstanding these reservations, Christine's attempt to redefine the cultural profile of woman was potent. She saw with great clarity how women had accepted and internalized an unjustifiable devaluation of their sex, including a presupposition of their limited intellect, for centuries.³ She pinpointed the hypocrisy with which men unjustly put women down while claiming a God-given right to do so.⁴ She understood (taking up a cue from Le Fèvre) how a successful challenge to misogyny entailed undermining the authority of prestigious literary authorities such as Ovid. She protested that the reality of women's behaviour did not vindicate the allegations misogynists flung at them. She suspected that misogyny was a kind of conspiracy wrought by senile male lechers and buttressed by jealous fear of female potential.⁵ What is striking, even in the light of the capacious precedent of the *Leesce*, is the comprehensiveness of her approach to the subject. She demonstrated intellectual courage and good sense as she systematically confronted the whole gamut of misogynistic notions, covert

¹ *City* II. 36.4

² *Letter* 12; *City* III. 19.2; and see Gottlieb 1985, Delany 1990, 88–103.

³ *City* I. 28.1.

⁴ *City* I. 3.3.

⁵ *City* I. 8.8 speaks of men attacking women out of jealousy at their superior intellect and behaviour; possibly prompted by *Leesce* 1155–61.

as well as explicit, in order to expose their speciousness. It has been argued that her view of woman was 'not antithetically constructed' in reaction to misogyny—that she did not rely on refutation by 'counter-cliché'.⁶ Perhaps the latter is more true than the former. *Of course* her view was antithetically constructed. In that epoch this was inevitable, and the time was long overdue for people to start coming forward to dismantle the accumulated dogma of antifeminism. But to do so rationally and constructively, rather than by descending to the kind of 'Women-are-evil / No-they-aren't' squabbling which the dogma promoted, this was the great task, and Christine rose to it.

Augustine had written of the 'City of God' in contradistinction to the 'city of this world'. In writing of the establishment of a 'City of Ladies', therefore, Christine signals her ambition and her seriousness of purpose. But, more than Augustine's, her 'city' is a *defensive* structure: it is built on the reputation of women conspicuous in every field of endeavour or morality, but it is thereby above all a stronghold designed to offer new protection to the sex which has previously been totally undefended against the serried ranks of antifeminism. (Doubtless Christine is also advertising her opposition to the cynical Ovidian view, perpetuated in *Romance of the Rose* 7669 ff., that the 'fort' of womanhood defends itself from male importunity with a strategic laziness that aims at defeat.) The process of building is of course active as well as defensive; a reconstitution of what woman is and can be, as demonstrated by historical and legendary example. Christine draws extensively on Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (*Concerning Famous Women*) in narrating these examples, which make up the bulk of her book. Few of them can be accommodated in the present volume, for it has seemed a greater priority to represent as fully as possible the framework they illustrate, namely Christine's point-by-point investigation of antifeminist shibboleths. Her questions are bold and penetrating; they reach frequently to the wellsprings of misogyny. Why, she asks, should husbands—and wives under their influence—be less happy at the birth of daughters than sons (II. 7.1)? The reasons suggested are anxieties about the cost of a daughter's dowry, and about safeguarding a young daughter from sexual corruption. Then comes the retort: sons cost a great deal more in education and in consum-

¹¹ Christine appeals to the argument for male responsibility, as in Ch. 8, Gower 2, *Dives* 19.

¹² Eccus. 42: 14; in Ch. I, Scripture 10.

¹³ 3 Kgs. 11: 1-10; cf. Ch. 2, Jerome 24.

* Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, tr. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 3-5, 17, 23-4, 26, 28-9, 71-2, 77, 80, 118-19, 127-8, 130-1, 165, 169-70, 185-6, 219-22. © Persea Books 1982. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Old French text in Curnow edition (Christine de Pizan 1975).

ables, they easily slide into a dissolute life, and they are more interested in quick access to their inheritance than in caring for elderly parents—a task left to daughters while sons roam as they please. Although (but also because) all this might seem to understate the patriarchal mentality which in the Middle Ages privileged the male line *per se*, such an analysis is thoroughly absorbing, not least for the extent to which it might be conditioned by, for instance, conventional literary arguments on the inconveniences of offspring, a sub-category of misogyny.³⁴ Then again, she crushes all the fuss about women's dress in one calm statement: one's conscience is not to be judged by what one wears.³⁵

The *City* is a response to a wide range of misogynistic texts. Some of the worst offenders are paraded in 1. 9 and 1. 10 (see 8 below). But Christine chooses the compendious *Lamentations* of Matheolus (probably in Jehan Le Fèvre's translation) as the chief bogey. The opening of the *City* tells of her starting to read this for relaxation, but finding herself distinctly unamused.

The Old Proverb: Women, Talk, and Tears

Christine mentions the proverb used by men to disparage women: 'God made women to speak, weep, and sew.'⁴⁶ Reason protests that Mary Magdalene earned God's special grace through her tears, while the great luminary of the Church, St Augustine, was converted by his mother's tears. Then she confronts the criticism of woman's speech.

7 (I. 10.5) [*Reason*] 'If women's language had been so blameworthy and of such small authority, as some men argue, our Lord Jesus Christ would never have deigned to wish that so worthy a mystery as His most gracious Resurrection be first announced by a woman, just as He commanded the blessed Magdalene, to whom He first appeared on Easter Day, to report and announce it to His Apostles and to Peter.' [*Christine*] '... Some foolish preachers teach that God first appeared to a woman because He knew well that she did not know how to keep quiet so that this way the news of His Resurrection would be spread more rapidly.'⁴⁷

8 She answered, 'My daughter, you have spoken well when you call them fools who have said this. It is not enough for them to attack women. They impute even to Jesus Christ such blasphemy, as if to say that He wished to reveal this great perfection and dignity through a vice. I do not know how a man could dare to say this, even in jest, as God should not be brought in on such joking matters. But as for the first question, regarding talking—in fact, it was fortunate for the woman from Canaan who was so great a talker and who would not stop yelling and howling after Jesus Christ as she followed Him through the streets of Jerusalem, crying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, for my daughter is sick."⁴⁸ And what did the good Lord do? He in whom all mercy abounded and abounds and from whom a single word from the heart sufficed for Him to show mercy! He seemed to take pleasure in the many words pouring from the mouth of this woman ever perseverant in her prayer. But why did He act like this? In order to test her constancy; for when He compared her to the dogs—which seemed a little harsh because she followed a foreign cult and not that of God—she was not ashamed to speak both well

⁴⁶ For the adage *fallere, flere, nere, statuit deus in mulier* ('God made woman to lie, cry, and spin') cf. Ch. 7, *Wob* 31. Christine touches only lightly on women's 'spinning', which is commended in Ch. 8, *Marbod* 5, and in *Bien des Fames* 83 ff.: Fiero *et al.* 1989, 110–13.

⁴⁷ As asserted in *Math.* 11. 2309 ff. and elsewhere (e.g. Langland, *Piers Plowman* 'B' XIX. 161–2). But see Ch. 8, *Abelard* 3, *Albertano* 3.

⁴⁸ *Matt.* 15: 22–8.

and wisely when she replied, "Sire, that is most true, but the little dogs live from the crumbs from their master's table." "O most wise woman, who taught you to speak this way? You have won your cause through your prudent language which stems from your good will." And one could clearly see this, for our Lord, turning to His Apostles, testified from His mouth that He had never found such faith in all of Israel and granted her request. Who could sufficiently sum up this honour paid to the feminine sex which the jealous despise?"

Reason adds that Christ did not disdain to talk to the Samaritan woman at the well, and that the Gospels record the fortunate words of the woman who couldn't stop herself crying, 'Blessed is the womb which bore you!'⁴⁹

Not an Inferior Intellect

The book is particularly concerned to repudiate insinuations about the inadequacy of women's minds. Reason attributes woman's exclusion from legal office, not to the 'Caphurnia' fantasy (*Matheolus* 10: Chapter 6 above), but to a sensible distribution of functions between the sexes.⁵⁰ But women are perfectly fit for executive roles; indeed, what they might lack in physical power they make up for in sharpness of mind. Although their knowledge is frequently limited through their restriction to a domestic realm, examples prove not only their ability to learn but also their innovative capacity—especially the case of Nicostrata, or 'Carmentis', who gave Italy laws and a new language.

9 (I. 33.1) [*Reason*] 'This lady knew through divine inspiration and the spirit of prophecy (in which she was remarkably distinguished, in addition to the other graces she possessed) how in time to come this land would be ennobled by excellence and famous over all the countries of the world. Therefore it seemed to her that, once the grandeur of the Roman Empire, which would rule the entire world, had been established, it would not be right for the Romans to use the strange and inferior letters and characters of another country. Moreover, in order to show forth her wisdom and the excellence of her mind to the centuries to come, she worked and studied so hard that she invented her own letters, which were completely different from those of other nations; that is, she established the Latin

⁴⁹ John 4: 3–26 and Luke 11: 27–8. Both instances were noted in woman's favour by Abelard (Scott Moncreiff 1974, 162–4), and the second is quoted by Margery Kempe in defence of women 'speaking of God': Meech and Allen 1940, 126.

⁵⁰ Reason conservatively accepts the assumption in canon law (Raming 1976, 28) that for women to practise law would be an impairment of the *verecundia* or modesty (*City 'onnesteté'*) befitting their sex.

alphabet and syntax, spelling, the difference between vowels and consonants, as well as a complete introduction to the science of grammar. She gave and taught these letters to the people and wished that they be widely known. This was hardly a minor or unprofitable contribution to learning which this woman invented, nor one for which she merits slight gratitude; for, thanks to the subtlety of this teaching and to the great utility and profit which have since accrued to the world, one can say that nothing more worthy in the world was ever invented.⁵¹

10 (I. 37.1) [*Christine*] 'My lady, I greatly admire what I have heard you say, that so much good has come into the world by virtue of the understanding of women. These men usually say that women's knowledge is worthless. In fact, when someone says something foolish, the widely voiced insult is that this is women's knowledge. In brief, the typical opinions and comments of men claim that women have been and are useful in the world only for bearing children and sewing. . . . (I. 38.4) Henceforth, let all writers be silent who speak badly of women, let all of them be silent—those who have attacked women and who still attack them in their books and poems, and all their accomplices and supporters too—let them lower their eyes, ashamed for having dared to speak so badly, in view of the truth which runs counter to their poems; this noble lady, Carmentis, through the profundity of her understanding, taught them like a schoolmistress—nor can they deny it—the lesson thanks to which they consider themselves so lofty and honoured; that is, she taught them the Latin alphabet!'