

in the very promises to abstain from things which are lawful and granted, the authority of a woman may not have force but only that of a man.' . . .⁹

8 (XVII) *A woman has no power but in all things may be subject to the power of a man. From Ambrose, in his book of Questions on the Old Testament.* 'It is agreed that a woman is subject to the power of a man, and has no authority; nor is she able to instruct nor to be a witness nor to make a promise nor to make a legal judgement.'¹⁰

9 (XVIII) *From Ambrose on the Hexameron, in the tract on the fourth day.* 'Adam was deceived by Eve, not Eve by Adam. It is just that the one whom the woman brought to sin may take control over her, lest woman fall again through self-indulgence.'¹¹

10 (XIX) *From Ambrose on the First Epistle to the Corinthians.* 'A woman ought to cover her head since it is not the image of God. But she ought to wear this sign in order that she may be shown to be subordinate and because error was started through woman. In church she may not have her head uncovered but veiled on account of reverence for the bishop, and she is not allowed to speak because the bishop assumes the role of Christ. Therefore, just as it will be before the judge Christ, so may it be before the bishop because he is the deputy of the Lord; because of original sin she ought to be seen to be subordinate.'¹²

11 (XX) *From Ambrose's book on Paradise.* 'Nor is it without significance that woman was created not from earth itself, from which Adam was fashioned, but from the rib of Adam, so that we might know that there is one bodily nature in man and woman, one source of the human race. So in the beginning man and woman were not created from two sources, nor were two men created, nor were two women, but man was made first and then woman from him. God, wishing to establish humankind in one nature, began this from one original creature and preserved it from the possibility of many and different natures.'¹³

⁹ *Quaest. in Numeros* (see n. 3), *PL* 34.745.

¹⁰ Not Ambrose but Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones ex veteri testamento*, in *PL* 35.2215-52 (2247). Woman's exclusion from legal office reflects Roman law.

¹¹ *Hexameron libri sex*, in *PL* 14.133-288 (277).

¹² *Commentarium in Epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios Primam*, in *PL* 17.193-290 (253-4). The author is Ambrosiaster; see Raming 1976, 34.

¹³ *De Paradiso*, in *PL* 14.291-332 (315).

12 *Gratian*: Therefore it is completely obvious that the husband is so much the head of the wife that she is not allowed to offer to God any vows of *abstinence*, or to enter the religious life, without the permission of a man. Although such vows may be affirmed with the permission of her husband, she is not allowed to fulfil the promise by her own agency when the man wishes to revoke his permission. Where vows of *continence* are concerned, they can be offered by one with the permission of the other, but after the permission is granted, the promises cannot be given up for any reason.

HELOISE (1101-1164) AND ABELARD (1079-1142)

The authenticity of the correspondence attributed to Heloise and Abelard has long been disputed, among other things because the letters only seem to have come to light in the latter part of the thirteenth century.¹⁴ For present purposes the letters are assumed authentic, though they would still warrant inclusion in this anthology if proved to be clever forgeries.

Abelard was one of the intellectual giants of the twelfth century in philosophy and theology. His passionate liaison with Heloise, a girl of conspicuous intellectual attainment who became his student, went sensationally wrong when it provoked her guardian Fulbert into castrating Abelard soon after the couple (much against the will of Heloise) had married. Both then retreated into the monastic life, Abelard eventually assisting with advice for her community. The couple's interaction is absorbing and subtle, as are the views on women which each expresses or implies. Heloise in effect gives a magnificent personal answer to misogyny's slurs about fickle and domineering women in the profundity and altruism of the love expressed for Abelard in her first letter; a love which she had not wanted to spoil with the 'chains' and self-interest she associated with marriage. Yet at the same time she absorbed not only the period's rhetoric about the 'weakness' of her sex (instanced in Abelard's own statement, 'men are naturally, both in mind and in body, stronger than women'¹⁵) but also the received disparagement of women as an impediment to the flowering male intellect. Despite various hints of pride in her sex,¹⁶ Heloise was prepared to apply in real life the misogynistic rejection of marriage derived from Jerome's writing. Thus, she 'inadvertently becomes the first woman to argue for the devaluation of woman in western thought'.¹⁷ However, there is a complication: her arguments are mainly *reported*, by Abelard to a third party in a letter called *The Story of his Misfortunes* (*Historia Calamitatum*). Heloise did later give them

¹⁴ The controversy is summarized in Brooke 1989, 93-102; and Luscombe 1980.

¹⁵ Letter 6; Scott Moncreiff 1974, 137.

¹⁶ Radice 1974, 165-6.

¹⁷ Allen 1985, 293. But her verdict on herself was not shared by those who commented on the couple's affair: Mann 1991, 53; and Drake 1976.

general endorsement, though she pointedly added as a major motive her distrust of the mercenary streak in marriage;¹⁸ but there is no knowing the extent to which Abelard 'polished' her views in reproducing them.

Heloise on Marriage

FROM THE STORY OF HIS MISFORTUNES*

1 What honour could she win, she protested, from a marriage which would dishonour me and humiliate us both?¹⁹ The world would justly exact punishment from her if she removed such a light from its midst. Think of the curses, the loss to the Church and grief of philosophers which would greet such a marriage! Nature had created me for all mankind—it would be a sorry scandal if I should bind myself to a single woman and submit to such base servitude. She absolutely rejected this marriage; it would be nothing but a disgrace and a burden to me. Along with the loss to my reputation, she put before me the difficulties of marriage, which the apostle Paul exhorts us to avoid when he says: 'Has your marriage been dissolved? Do not seek a wife . . . those who marry will have pain and grief in this bodily life, and my aim is to spare you.' And again: 'I want you to be free from anxious care.'²⁰

2 But if I would accept neither the advice of the Apostle nor the exhortations of the Fathers on the heavy yoke of marriage, at least, she argued, I could listen to the philosophers. . . . For example, St Jerome in the first book of his *Against Jovinian* recalls how Theophrastus sets out in considerable detail the unbearable annoyances of marriage and its endless anxieties, in order to prove by the clearest possible arguments that a man should not take a wife. . . .²¹

3 'Consider', she said, 'the true conditions for a dignified way of life. What harmony can there be between pupils and nursemaids, desks and cradles, books or tablets and distaffs, pen or stylus and spindles? Who can concentrate on thoughts of Scripture or philosophy and be able to endure babies crying, nurses soothing them with lullabies,

¹⁸ Radice 1974, 113–14.

* Tr. Betty Radice, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 70–4, 130–1, 101–2. © Betty Radice 1974. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd. Latin text in Muckle 1950/1953/1955.

¹⁹ Although ecclesiastics of the time not infrequently had mistresses and children (and Heloise had already borne Abelard's son), marriage would be a 'humiliation' as a bar to promotion, eclipsing his career.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 7: 27, 28, 32.

²¹ See Ch. 2, Jerome 12 ff.

and all the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house? Will he put up with the constant muddle and squalor which small children bring into the home? . . . Consequently, the great philosophers of the past have despised the world, not renouncing it so much as escaping from it, and have denied themselves every pleasure so as to find peace in the arms of philosophy alone.²² The greatest of them, Seneca, gives this advice to Lucilius: 'Philosophy is not a subject for idle moments. We must neglect everything else and concentrate on this, for no time is long enough for it. Put it aside for a moment, and you might as well give it up, for once interrupted it will not remain. We must resist all other occupations, not merely dispose of them but reject them.'²³

4 ' . . . But if pagans and laymen could live in this way, though bound by no profession of faith, is there not a greater obligation on you, as clerk and canon, not to put base pleasures before your sacred duties, and to guard against being sucked down headlong into this Charybdis, there to lose all sense of shame and be plunged forever into a whirlpool of impurity?²⁴ If you take no thought for the privilege of a clerk, you can at least uphold the dignity of a philosopher, and let a love of propriety curb your shamelessness if the reverence due to God means nothing to you. Remember Socrates' marriage . . .'

The story of Xanthippe is rehearsed (see Chapter 2, Jerome 20); after which is briefly mentioned Heloise's argument 'that the name of mistress instead of wife would be dearer to her'. Heloise's internalization of the ascetic male suspicion of woman becomes further apparent in Letter 3, where a sense of guilt about his injury—though 'we were both to blame'—prompts an anguished outburst setting herself in the lineage of Eve.

Heloise as Eve

FROM LETTER 3: HELOISE TO ABELARD

5 What misery for me—born as I was to be the cause of such a crime! Is it the general lot of women to bring total ruin on great men? Hence the warning about women in Proverbs: 'But now, my son, listen to me, attend to what I say: do not let your heart entice you into her ways, do not stray down her paths; she has wounded and

²² A theme developed in *Ag. Jov.* II. 9, and imitated by Abelard in *Theologia christiana*.

²³ Seneca, *Epistulae ad Lucillum*, 72.3.

²⁴ Cf. Ch. 4, Marbod 5.

laid low so many, and the strongest have all been her victims. Her house is the way to hell, and leads down to the halls of death.²⁵ And in Ecclesiastes: 'I put all to the test . . . I find woman more bitter than death; she is a snare, her heart a net, her arms are chains. He who is pleasing to God eludes her, but the sinner is her captive.'²⁶

6 It was the first woman in the beginning who lured man from Paradise, and she who had been created by the Lord as his helpmate became the instrument of his total downfall. And that mighty man of God, the Nazarite whose conception was announced by an angel, Delilah alone overcame; betrayed to his enemies and robbed of his sight, he was driven by his suffering to destroy himself along with his enemies.²⁷ Only the woman he had slept with could reduce to folly Solomon, wisest of all men; she drove him to such a pitch of madness that, although he was the man whom the Lord had chosen to build the temple in preference to his father David, who was a righteous man, she plunged him into idolatry until the end of his life, so that he abandoned the worship of God which he had preached and taught in word and writing.²⁸ Job, holiest of men, fought his last and hardest battle against his wife, who urged him to curse God.²⁹ The cunning arch-tempter well knew from repeated experience that men are most easily brought to ruin through their wives, and so he directed his usual malice against us too, and attacked you by means of marriage when he could not destroy you through fornication. Denied the power to do evil through evil, he effected evil through good.

7 At least I can thank God for this: the tempter did not prevail on me to do wrong of my own consent, like the women I have mentioned, though in the outcome he made me the instrument of his malice. . .

Although this *cherchez la femme* attitude was also offered at one point as a kind of excuse by Abelard to Heloise's uncle,³⁰ it is notable that Abelard generally accepted personal responsibility for the sexual initiative in their affair. But his view of woman was ambivalent. His high estimate of women's importance in Christian history can be seen below in Chapter 8. Yet as a commentator on Genesis, if anything, he disparaged Eve more sharply than

²⁵ Prov. 7: 24-7; in Ch. 1, Scripture 6.

²⁶ Eccles. 7: 27; in Ch. 1, Scripture 8.

²⁷ Samson, Solomon, and David are a conventional trio; see Ch. 2, Jerome 24.

²⁸ 3 Kgs. 8: 17-20; and 3 Kgs. 11: 1-8; but Heloise distinctively transforms plural ('strange women') into singular.

²⁹ Job 2: 9-10. Job's wife appears rarely in misogynistic writing.

³⁰ Radice 1974, 70.

others.³¹ Moreover, his acceptance of the prevailing generalization that the sex was 'weaker' led to a condescending attitude to convents lacking masculine guidance—a touchy subject in the period but especially so for him, since his continuing association with Heloise in her community made tongues wag.

Abelard on the 'Weaker Sex'

FROM THE STORY OF HIS MISFORTUNES

8 The weaker sex needs the help of the stronger, so much so that the Apostle lays down that the man must always be over the woman, as her head, and as a sign of this he orders her always to have her head covered.³² And so I am much surprised that the custom should have been long established in convents of putting abbesses in charge of women just as abbots are set over men, and of binding women by profession according to the same rule, for there is so much in the Rule which cannot be carried out by women, whether in authority or subordinate. In several places too, the natural order is overthrown to the extent that we see abbesses and nuns ruling the clergy who have authority over the people,³³ with opportunities of leading them on to evil desires in proportion to their dominance, holding them as they do beneath a heavy yoke. The satirist has this in mind when he says that 'Nothing is more intolerable than a rich woman.'³⁴

ST THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274)

In his *Summa*, the Dominican philosopher-theologian St Thomas conducted a systematic review of Christian doctrine. He was extensively influenced by Augustine: for example, he settled the question 'whether Eve's sin was graver than Adam's' against Eve by quoting Augustine's arguments that Adam did not share the presumption which made her believe the serpent, and that Adam's sin was lessened because committed for the sake of companionship.³⁵ Wherever possible, however, he wanted to reconcile the teachings of Augustine and other Fathers with Aristotelian philosophy, which had quite recently become available in the Latin West. In the case of doctrine on women, his best efforts could not mask a disparity between Aristotle's concept of her as 'defective male' and the Church's belief that, as a

³¹ McLaughlin 1975, 305-6.

³² 1 Cor. 11: 5; cf. Gratian 4 and 10.

³³ Controversy had been stirred by the situation at Fontevrault, where the abbess was exercising authority over male clergy assigned to her nuns' service.

³⁴ See Ch. 1, Juv. 8. Abelard felt strongly that abbesses should not come from powerful families or conduct themselves in lordly fashion, but saw the male supervision as consultative (Radice 1974, 209-14).

³⁵ S. Th. IIa IIae. Q. 163 art. 4; cf. Ch. 2, Augustine 4 and 6.

5 (45) As exemplar of this dire monster to be avoided, ancient wisdom contrived the terrifying Chimaera. Not undeservedly, it is said a threefold shape was given to it: the front part lion, the rear a serpent's tail, and the middle parts nothing but red hot flame.¹⁴ This image mimics the nature of a harlot, in that she seizes spoil to carry off in her lion's mouth, while feigning to be something with an impressive, quasi-noble appearance. With this façade she consumes her captives in the flames of love in which nothing of substance or weight is seen; only frivolous, irrational, furious lust. The back parts are crammed with deadly poison because death and damnation terminate sensual pleasures.

6 (58) Turbulent Charybdis, who sucks in and draws to its death everything near her, bears female form.¹⁵ The Siren is also like this: she entices fools by singing lovely melodies, draws them towards her once they are enticed, and when they are drawn in she plunges them into the annihilating abyss. But Ulysses evaded this fate. He closed his crew's ears to the notorious songs while physically restraining himself from being able to change course, by being lashed with ropes to the mast of the speeding ship. No less successfully did he elude evil Circe's sweet poisons. Those who drank them took on the shapes of wild beasts, transformed into the likeness of dogs and filthy swine. They signify degenerates and sensualists living the life of a herd of animals under the sway of lust.

7 (71) Oh race of men! Beware the honied poisons, the sweet songs and the pull of the dark depths. Do not let the charm of contrived appearances seduce you; be in dread of the destructive flames and the fierce serpent. If a beautiful woman courts you aiming to deceive you, and if you have such confidence in yourself that you stout-heartedly prepare to enter the fray, you will deceive yourself with ignorance, if you scorn the darts of the enemy. It is not the rule in this type of struggle that you can win by close combat. It is better to undertake retreat and attain safety with your feet. If you run, you will get away; if you approach, you will be caught.¹⁶ But I warn you

(daughter of Leda) was 'disputed over' in a catastrophic war such as the poem has already blamed on women; see also Ch. 2, Jerome 21.

¹⁴ The Chimaera's middle was usually (as in Map 6 below) described as a she-goat's, but was fire in Ovid, *Met.* ix. 647. A similar moralization is in Bernardus Silvestris 1979, 69.

¹⁵ Antiquity portrayed Scylla and Charybdis (rocks flanking the treacherous Strait of Messina) as mythological monsters preying on ships; cf. Ch. 6, *Corb.* 14.

¹⁶ Recalling some famous advice in Ovid's *Cures for Love* (79 ff. and 213 ff.)

WALTER MAP

not to look back at her, since anyone who toys with desire turned to stone by the very sight of the Gorgon.¹⁷

8 (84) Whoever seeks earth's calm seas in the ship of the Church in order to arrive at the desired harbour of the homeland—avoiding sweet-sounding songs and dangerous attractions—should block up and protect the hearing with lawful doctrine and stay fastened to the timber with rope of divine fear. The timber is the cross our salvation, like a ship's mast. Nor is it without sailyards, which are the arms of the cross.

WALTER MAP (1140–c.1209)

THE LETTER OF VALERIUS TO RUFFINUS, AGAINST MARRIAGE* (c.1180)

Walter Map was a member of Henry II's court and later Archdeacon of Oxford. He wrote this letter around 1180, and at first (because of his use of the pseudonym) it was credited not to him, but usually to the ancient Roman author of a book of 'Notable Deeds and Sayings', Valerius Maximus. Eventually Map reclaimed it by inserting it into his capacious work, *Courtiers' Trifles* (*De nugis curialium*).

1 I had a friend who lived the life of a philosopher; after many visits over a long time I once noticed that he had changed in his dress, his bearing and his expression: he sighed a lot, his face was pale and his dress vulgarly ostentatious; he said little and was sombre, but was arrogant in a strange way; he had lost his old wit and jollity. He said he was not well, and indeed he wasn't. I saw him wandering about alone, and in so far as respect for me allowed he refused to speak to me. I saw a man in the grip of Venus' paralysis: he seemed all suitor, not at all a philosopher. However, I hoped that he would recover after his lapse: I pardoned what I didn't know; I thought it was a joke, not something brutally serious: he planned not to be loved but to be wived—he wanted to be not Mars but Vulcan.¹⁸ My mind failed me; because he was bent on death, I began to die with him. I spoke to him, but was repulsed. I sent people to talk to him, and when he wouldn't listen to them I said 'An evil beast hath devoured him.'¹⁹ To

¹⁷ Medusa.

* Tr. and © A. G. Rigg. Latin text in Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium, Courtiers' Trifles*, ed. and tr. by M. R. James, rev. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 287–313.

¹⁸ Vulcan was Venus' husband; Mars her lover.

¹⁹ Gen. 37: 33.

fulfil all the good turns of friendship I sent him a letter in which I altered the names, and called myself (Walter) Valerius and him (John, a red-head [Lat. *rufus*]) Ruffinus, and called the letter 'the letter of Valerius to Ruffinus the philosopher, against marrying'.

2 I am forbidden to speak, and I cannot keep silent. I hate the cranes, the voice of the night-owl, the screech-owl and the other birds which gloomily predict with their wails the sadness of foul winter, and you mock the prophecies of disaster which will surely come true if you continue as you are. Therefore I am forbidden to speak, for I am a prophet not of pleasure but of truth.

3 I love the nightingale and the blackbird, for with their soft harmony they herald the joy of the gentle breeze, and above all the swallow,²⁰ which fills the season of longed-for joy with its fullness of delights, and I am not deceived. You love parasites and hangers-on with their sweet flatteries, and above all Circe who pours on you joys full of sweet-scented delight, to deceive you: I cannot keep silent, lest you are turned into a pig or an ass.²¹

4 The servant of Babel pours out for you honeyed poison, which 'moveth itself aright'²² and delights and leads astray your spirit: therefore I am forbidden to speak. I know that 'at the last it biteth like a serpent' and will give a wound which will admit no antidote: therefore I cannot keep silent.

5 You have many to persuade you to pleasure—and to your peril; I am a stumbling speaker of bitter truth which makes you vomit: therefore I am forbidden to speak. The voice of the goose is criticized among swans which are taught only to please, but it taught the senators to save the city from fire, the treasure-houses from plunder, and themselves from the arrows of their foes.²³ Perhaps you too will realize with the senators, for you are no fool, that the swans sing death, and the goose screeches safety: therefore I cannot keep silent.

6 You are all afire with longing, and, seduced by the nobility of its fine head, do not realize that you are seeking the Chimaera;²⁴ you refuse to recognize that that three-formed monster is graced with the

²⁰ This word usually means 'nightingale', but clearly Map had a different bird in mind from the first.

²¹ I.e., by Circe: cf. Marbod 6 above.

²² Prov. 23: 31.

²³ Alluding to a legend of how geese saved Rome from an attack by the Gauls.

²⁴ Cf. Marbod 5 above.

face of a noble lion, is sullied by the belly of a stinking goat, and is armed with the tail of a poisonous serpent: therefore I am forbidden to speak.

7 Ulysses was enticed by the harmony of the Sirens, but, because he knew the voices of the Sirens and the drinks of Circe, he restrained himself with the chains of virtue, in order to avoid the whirlpool.²⁵ I trust in the Lord and hope that you will imitate Ulysses, not Empedocles, who was overcome by his philosophy (or rather, melancholy), and chose Etna as his tomb.²⁶ I hope you will take notice of the parable you hear, I cannot keep silent.

8 But your present flame, by which the worse choice pleases you, is stronger than the flame which draws you to me; therefore, lest the greater flame draws the lesser to it, and I myself perish, I am forbidden to speak. That I may speak with the spirit by which I am yours, let the two flames be weighed in any scale, equal or not, and let your decision, whatever it is, be at my risk: you must pardon me, for the impatience of the love I have for you will not let me keep silent.

9 After the first creation of man the first wife of the first Adam sated the first hunger by the first sin, against God's command. The sin was the child of Disobedience, which will never cease before the end of the world to drive women tirelessly to pass on to the future what they learned from their mother. My friend, a disobedient wife is dishonour to a man: beware.

10 The Truth which cannot be deceived said of the blessed David, 'I have found a man according to my heart.'²⁷ But by love of a woman he fell conspicuously from adultery to homicide, to fulfil the saying 'scandals never come singly'.²⁸ For every iniquity is rich in followers, and whatever house it enters, it hands over to be soiled by abuse. My friend, Bathsheba was silent, and spoke no wrong; yet she became the spur which caused the fall of her perfect husband, the arrow of death for her innocent spouse. Is she innocent who strives with both eloquence, like Samson's Delilah, and beauty, like Bathsheba, when

²⁵ Cf. Marbod 6 above.

²⁶ See Ovid, *Met.* xiv, and Horace, *Ars poetica* 465–6, stating that Empedocles coolly jumped into burning Etna.

²⁷ 1 Kgs. 13: 14. Map introduces the familiar trio of men 'brought low' by women—David, Samson, Solomon: cf. Ch. 2, Jerome 24.

²⁸ Matt. 18: 7

the latter's beauty triumphed alone, even without intending to?²⁹ If you are no closer than David to the heart of God, do not doubt that you too can fall.

11 Solomon, Sun of men, treasure of God's delights, singular home of wisdom, was clouded over by the ink of darkness and lost the light of his soul, the smell of his glory, and the glory of his house by the witchcraft of women: finally, he bowed down before Baal, and from a priest of the Lord was turned into a servant of the devil, so that he can be seen to have fallen from a higher precipice than Phoebus in the fall of Phaëton, when he became Admetus' shepherd instead of Jupiter's Apollo.³⁰ My friend, if you are not wiser than Solomon—and no man is—you are not too great to be bewitched by a woman. Open your eyes and see.

12 The very best woman (who is rarer than the phoenix)³¹ cannot be loved without the bitterness of fear, anxiety, and frequent misfortune. Wicked women, however—who swarm so abundantly that no place is free from their wickedness—sting sharply when they are loved; they give their time to tormenting a man until his body is divided from his soul. My friend, it is a pagan saying "Take care to whom you give"; the proper advice is "Take care to whom you give yourself."

13 Lucretia, Penelope, and the Sabine women carried the banners of chastity and (with few followers) brought back their prizes. My friend, there are no Lucretias, Penelopes or Sabine women now;³² beware of them all.

14 Arrayed against the ranks of the Sabine women are Scylla, daughter of Nisus, and Myrrha, daughter of Cynaras, and behind them come many crowds of all the vices, assembled in an army to bring sighs, groans, and finally hell to their captives. My friend, so that you don't fall prey to these merciless predators, do not fall asleep in their path when they pass by.

²⁹ Cf. Ch. 1, Scripture 4; and, on the question of 'intention', Ch. 3, Rule 4; and Ch. 8, Dives 16.

³⁰ Appears to confuse a punishment suffered by Apollo (Phoebus) with the story of his son Phaëton's misdirection of Phoebus' chariot.

³¹ In Theophrastus (Ch. 2, Jerome 16), a good woman is a 'rare bird'; in Juv. (Ch. 1 Juv. 4) a 'black swan'. Map's modification, 'phoenix' (the legendary unique bird which immolated itself every 500 years, to be reborn from its ashes), is imitated in Ch. 6, RR 8, where 'white crows' are added.

³² In Ovid, Penelope and the Sabine women were exemplars of chastity, Scylla and Myrrha of wild passion: Ch. 1, Ovid 7; and 6, and 1.

15 Jupiter was king of the earth, and was also called king of heaven, because of his singular strength of body and incomparable refinement of mind; yet he was compelled to run after Europa, bellowing like a bull.³³ My friend, you see that even one whose virtue raised him above heaven was lowered to the level of the beasts by a woman. A woman will drive you too to bellowing, if you are not stronger than Jupiter, whose strength was unmatched.

16 Phoebus first encircled the whole world with the rays of his wisdom, and so alone deserved the glory of the name 'Sun'. He was besotted with love for Leucothoe, bringing shame on himself and death on her; for a long time he suffered an eclipse, was changed, and frequently lost his brightness (which the whole world needed).³⁴ My friend, avoid Leucothoe, so that your inner light does not turn into darkness.

17 Mars earned the title 'god of warriors' because of the well known frequency of his triumphs, which he won by his quickness and vigour. When he least expected it, he and Venus were bound together by Vulcan: the chains were invisible, but they could still feel them. This event earned the applause of satirists and the mockery of the court of heaven.³⁵ My friend, at least think about the chains which you do not see but already partly feel: get free while the chains can still be broken, lest that lame and ugly blacksmith (unfit to share a god's table or a goddess's bed), as is his habit, ties you to his Venus and makes you like himself, ugly and lame (or, what I fear more, deformed); you would not be able to acquire a cloven hoof³⁶ to make you clean; tied to Venus, you would be an object of sorrow and mockery to those that see you, applauded by the blind.

18 Paris, that false judge of goddesses, rejected Pallas because she promised profit rather than pleasure. My friend, would you make a similar decision?³⁷

19 I see that already your fastidious mind is skimming over what you read as quickly as possible, not paying attention to the morals but looking for fine figures of speech. You are waiting for the muddied stream to flow past, for the mud to separate, and for clear

³³ Ovid, *Met.* vi. 103 ff.

³⁴ Ovid, *Met.* iv. 190 ff.

³⁵ Ovid, *Met.* iv. 171 ff.

³⁶ Based on Deut. 14: 6.

³⁷ Paris 'decided' in favour of Venus when she offered him a beautiful wife, as against Minerva, who offered success in war, and Juno, who offered greatness.

waters to appear, but you are waiting in vain, for streams must match their sources, whether muddied or clear. My faulty expression reflects the inexperience of my heart; the lumpy unevenness of my words offends a well bred mind. Fully conscious of this lack of polish, I would gladly have turned aside from my dissuasion, but, because I cannot keep silent, I have spoken to the best of my ability. If I had as much elegance of style as I have enthusiasm for the topic, I would be sending you such elegant words, joined together in such a noble union, that both separately and together they would be seen to bring a blessing on their author. But since you are indebted to me for whatever my love (still bare and unproductive but not, I hope, infertile) can deserve, in the meantime patiently give me your ear until I unfold what I have wrapped up. Do not ask me for an orator's purple or white (which I sadly admit I do not know), but accept the good will of the writer and the truth of what is written.

20 On the day on which a cruel Atropos dared to cut his noble thread, Julius Caesar (for whose greatness the world was too narrow) humbly lent his ear, at the door of the Capitol, to Tongilius, who was lowly but divine, as he foretold the daggers. If Caesar had paid attention, those to whom he paid the penalty would have paid it to him. But when I foretell the daggers that await you, you give ear to me like the serpent to the poisoners; you pay attention like a boar to barking dogs; you are as content as a snake that hides from the midsummer sun. You look after your own interests like a spurned Medea; you have as much pity on yourself as the sea does on shipwrecked sailors. You only restrain your hands out of respect for the king's peace. My friend, the conqueror of the world humbled himself to his faithful adviser, though this side of perfect humility; he almost withdrew his foot, because he almost obeyed; he succumbed to the penalty because he did not obey completely; his great humility did him no good because it was not complete. What will such wild inhumanity, such inflexible stubbornness, such disdainful arrogance do for you, who of your own accord rush unarmed into the ambushes of robbers? Please humble yourself as Caesar (who had humbled the world) humbled himself, and listen to your friend. If you think that Caesar was mistaken in not listening to advice, listen and take note of what happened to others, so that their misfortunes can benefit you: a rebuke supported by examples does no harm. I do not know in what refuge you are protected or in what sanctuary you lie idle. Caesar found the merciless to be traitors, and did not turn back;

if you ever escaped such a school, did you find the pious to be without pity?

21 King Phoroneus, who gladly published laws for the people and first embellished Greek culture with them, on the day on which he went the way of all truth said to his brother Leontius, 'I would not lack the highest summit of good fortune, if only I had never had a wife.' Leontius said, 'How has a wife impeded you?' He replied, 'All married men know!' My friend, I wish you had experienced marriage but were not now married, so that you would know what an impediment it is to felicity!

22 The Emperor Valentius, eighty years old and still a virgin, when on the day of his death he heard the praises of his triumphs recounted—and he had had many—said that he was only proud of one victory. Asked 'Which?' he said, 'When I conquered my worst enemy, my own flesh.'³⁸ My friend, this emperor would have left the world without glory, if he had not boldly resisted that with which you have now made a pact.

23 After his divorce from Terentia, Cicero would not marry again; he said it was not possible to give one's attention both to a wife and to philosophy.³⁹ My friend, I wish your mind would give you this answer, or that your tongue would reply to me; at any rate, deign to imitate the master of eloquence by at least speaking, to give me some hope, even if it is vain.

24 Canius of Cadiz, a poet of a light and pleasant wit, was reproved by the sombre hen-pecked historian Livy of Phoenicia, because he enjoyed the loves of many women: 'You cannot share in our philosophy when you yourself are shared by so many: Tityus does not love Juno with a liver torn into so many pieces by vultures!'⁴⁰ Canius replied: 'Whenever I slip, I get up more cautiously; when I am pushed down a little, I come up for air more quickly. The alternations of my nights make my days happier: a perpetuity of darkness is like hell. The first lilies of the springtime sun spread with a more effusive joy if they enjoy winds both from the south-east and the south-west—more than those which are blown over by the single blast of

³⁸ From Cicero's *De Senectute*, 47.

³⁹ Cf. Ch. 2, Jerome 20.

⁴⁰ Tityus' punishment for attempted rape (though not of Juno) was to have vultures tear perpetually at his liver in Tartarus. (Map seems to have invented this conversation.)

the fiery south wind. Mars broke his chains and sits at the heavenly banquet, from which hen-pecked Vulcan is excluded, held back by his own rope. Many threads bind less firmly than one chain: from philosophy I obtain pleasure—you go to it for relief! My friend, I approve the words of both, but the lives of neither, but it is true that many diseases, which continually interrupt health, do less harm than a single disease which continually afflicts one with incurable illnesses.

25 Weeping, Pacuvius said to his neighbour Arrius, 'Friend, I have in my garden an unlucky tree: my first wife hanged herself on it, then my second wife, and now the third.' Arrius replied, 'I'm surprised you find yourself able to weep in all these successes'; then he said, 'Good Lord, think how many sorrows that tree has saved you!' Thirdly, he said, 'Friend, let me have some shoots of that tree to plant for myself.' My friend, I also say to you, I'm afraid you may have to beg shoots of that tree when you won't be able to find any.⁴¹

26 Sulpicius, who had divorced a noble and chaste wife, knew where his own shoe pinched him.⁴² My friend, be careful that you don't have a pinching shoe which you can't take off.

27 Cato of Utica said, 'If the world could exist without women, our company would not differ from that of the gods.'⁴³ My friend, Cato said nothing that he hadn't experienced and known; none of these men who attack the deceits of women do so without having themselves been deceived—they are fully experienced and aware. You should believe them, for they tell the truth: they know that love pleases and stabs the loved one; they know that the flower of Venus is a rose, for under its bright colour lie hidden many thorns.

28 Metellus would not marry the daughter of Marius, although she was rich in dowry, beautiful to look at, famous in birth, and of good reputation; he said, 'I prefer to be mine than hers'; Marius said, 'But she will be yours'; Metellus retorted, 'A man has to be a woman's, because it is a point of logic that the predicates are only what the subject allow.'⁴⁴ Thus, by a joke Metellus turned away a load from his back. My friend, even if it is fitting to take a wife, it is not

⁴¹ Cf. Ch. 7, *WolB* 56; the anecdote goes back to Cicero, *De orat.* 11. 69.

⁴² Cf. Ch. 2, Jerome 21.

⁴³ From a pseudo-Augustinian sermon: Christine de Pizan counters it in *City* 1. 9. 3.

⁴⁴ Puns on *predicate* and *subject* (that which is literally 'placed underneath', but logically governs the predicate) abound in medieval Latin antifeminist writings.

expedient. May it be love (and not blind love) that is in question, not income; may you choose beauty, not clothes; her mind, not her gold; may your bride be a wife, not a dowry. If it can possibly happen in this way, you may be able to be a predicate in such a way that you do not derive anger from the subject!

29 Lais of Corinth, a renowned beauty, only deigned to accept the embraces of kings and princes, but she tried to share the bed of the philosopher Demosthenes, so that she would seem, by breaking his notorious chastity, to have made rocks move by her beauty (as Amphion did with his lyre), and having attracted him by her blandishments she toyed with him pleasantly. When Demosthenes was enticed to her bedroom, Lais asked him for a hundred talents for the privilege; he looked up to heaven and said 'I don't pay so much to repent!'⁴⁵ My friend, I wish you would lift your attention to heaven, and avoid that which can only be redeemed by repentance.

30 Livia killed her husband whom she hated greatly; Lucilla killed hers, whom she loved to excess.⁴⁶ The former intentionally mixed poison, the latter was deceived and poured out madness as a cup of love. My friend, these women strove with opposite intentions, but neither was cheated of the natural end of female treachery, that is, evil. Women walk by varying and diverse paths, but whatever the paths they wander, whatever the by-ways they take, there is one result, one finishing-post for all their routes, one head and point of agreement of all their ways—mischief. Take the example of these two women as evidence that woman, whether she loves or hates, is bold in everything—crafty, when she wants to do harm (which is always), and when she tries to help frequently gets in the way, and so turns out to do harm even unintentionally. You are placed in the furnace: if you are gold, you will come out finer.

31 Deianeira clothed Hercules in a shirt, and brought vengeance on the 'hammer of monsters' with the blood of a monster: what she had contrived to bring her happiness resulted in her tears. My friend, Deianeira knew and saw that Nessus had been pierced by Hercules' spear, but nevertheless she trusted Nessus in her attempt on Hercules, and almost of her own accord enfolded in death the man whom she ought to have wrapped in a shirt.⁴⁷ A woman of unsound

⁴⁵ A story transmitted by Aulus Gellius.

⁴⁶ Livia was an accomplice in the poisoning of her husband Drusus, Emperor Tiberius' son; Lucilla is not known.

⁴⁷ The centaur Nessus, dying after Hercules wounded him for trying to rape his wife

and rash spirit, her will constantly unbalanced, thinks that what she wants is most important, not what is expedient; as she desires above all to please, she is determined to put her pleasure ahead of everything. Hercules fulfilled twelve inhuman labours, but by the thirteenth, which surpassed all inhumanity, he was consumed. Thus the bravest of men lay dead, to be lamented just as he lamented himself—he who had held up on his shoulders the span of the world without a groan.

32 Finally, what woman, among so many thousand thousands, ever saddened the eager and consistent suitor by a permanent refusal?⁴⁸ Which one ever invariably cut off the words of a wooer? Her reply always savours of her favour, and however hard she may be she will always have hidden in her words some hint of encouragement for your plea. Any woman may say 'No', but none says 'No' for ever. Gold broke through the defences of Acrisius' tower and violated Danaë's chastity although it was protected with a complex rampart.⁴⁹ My friend, this is how a debaucher rained from heaven on a maiden who had triumphed over earth; this is how someone of superior rank overcomes a woman whom a lowly suitor cannot deceive. The fierce north wind uproots a tree that stands firm against the gentle western breeze.

33 Perictione, an elderly virgin with a firm reputation for chastity, was finally overcome by the phantom of Apollo; she conceived and gave birth to Plato.⁵⁰ My friend, look how vigilance preserved her intact, but an illusion in a dream deflowered her, so that we can see that every rose bush is deprived of its crimson glory by some whirlwind. But it turned out well (if anything can be well like this), since Plato followed his father in his wisdom, and thus inherited the mystery and majestic name of his father.

34 My friend, are you more surprised or indignant that in my examples I suggest pagans as models for you to imitate, idolaters to you who are a Christian, wolves to a lamb, evil men to you who are

Deianeira, told her that his blood could act as a love-potion; but the blood was poisoned from Hercules' arrow, and when later she sent him a robe smeared with it, the robe clung to his flesh and tortured him: see Ovid, *Met.* ix. 99 ff.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ch. 1, Ovid 1.

⁴⁹ The Ovidian assertion that women are all ultimately seducible is capped with an Ovidian example of the difficulty of protecting virginity: on Danaë, see Ch. 1, Ovid 4.

⁵⁰ The legend that Plato was fathered on Perictione by an apparition of Apollo is in *Ag. Jov.* 1. 42.

good? I want you to be like the exemplary bee that gathers honey from the nettle, and to suck honey from the rock and oil from the hardest stone. I know that the pagan tales are superstitious, but every creation of God provides some model for good behaviour: God Himself is named lion, worm, and ram. Those who lack the faith do many things wrongly, but some things which, though of no merit in themselves, could yield an abundant fruit among us. But if they, who lacked hope, faith, charity and a preacher, wore leather belts [i.e. like John the Baptist], but we are asses or pigs or wild animals out of some lack of humanity, by what merit of faith, charity, and hope will we be found worthy, when we see the prophets, Apostles, and especially our great Lord, who can only be seen by those with pure hearts? Or, if the pagans, out of enthusiasm for their arts, wore themselves out by many struggles, with no vision of the future blessedness but only to avoid ignorance, what will happen to us, if we neglect the divine page which is directed to the truth, which is illumination, a lamp for the feet and a lantern to light the paths? I wish you would take out the divine page, read it, and take it into your room, so that the King will take you into His. You pledged your troth to Holy Scripture with the flowers of the springtime of your life; in your summertime she waits for you to bring grapes: do not hurt her by taking another bride, lest at harvest-time your grapes are the wild kind. I want you to be the bridegroom of Pallas, not of Venus.⁵¹ Pallas will adorn you with fine necklaces and clothe you in wedding clothes. The marriage will be celebrated with Apollo as your best man; the wedding songs will be taught to the cedars of Lebanon by Mercury.⁵² I have devoutly nurtured the hope of this long desired celebration, but in fear. This has been the purpose of this whole recital; although slow, this whole address will hasten to this end: the firmness of my dissuasion, of which you feel the iron-sharpened barbs, has been directed to this purpose.

35 *Conclusion of the preceding epistle.* The hand of the surgeon is hard, but healing. These words are also hard, but healthy: I hope that they are as useful to you as they are well meant. You say that I am imposing a strict way of life on you. Granted: for the way that leads to life is strict, and there is no smooth path to complete joy; indeed, it is through rough places that we get to even moderate joys.

⁵¹ I.e. of wisdom, not of love.

⁵² Conflation of allusions to S. of S. 5: 15, and Martianus Capella's 5th c. poem, *Marriage of Philology and Mercury*.

Jason learned that to reach the Golden Fleece he would have to pass through a sea still unravished by oars or boats, past sulphur-breathing bulls, and a watchful poisonous serpent. Following a plan that was sound, if not easy, he went and returned, and brought back a desirable treasure.⁵³ So the bitter wormwood of truth is accepted by a humble and well-disposed mind, is made fertile by assiduous care, and is brought to fruition by useful perseverance. Thus, the seed is sown by the south wind, pourer of rains; it is strengthened by the north wind, that sweeps the streets; it is brought to fulness by the west wind, that creates the flowers. So hard beginnings are rewarded by a sweet conclusion, and a narrow path leads to wide palaces, a slender track to the land of the living. But, to give support to my argument from the testimony of ancient writers, read Theophrastus' *Aureolus* and Ovid's *Medea*,⁵⁴ and you will find that almost nothing is impossible to a woman.

36 My friend, may almighty God not let you be deceived by the tricks of almighty woman;⁵⁵ may He light your heart, lest your eyes be bewitched and you go where I fear. But lest I seem to have written an *Orestes*, farewell.

ANDREAS CAPELLANUS

FROM *ON LOVE** (*DE AMORE*: C. 1185)

Not much is known for sure about Andreas 'the chaplain', though there is a reasonable hypothesis that he was associated with the French royal court and knew Countess Marie de Champagne in the 1180s. His *De amore* is more or less a mock-textbook on the refinements of courtship, full of questions and answers and model debates within an overall structure loosely derived from Ovid's *Art of Love*.

The 'Double Standard'

In emulation of Ovid, Andreas elaborates an art of courting in Book 1, and proceeds to the art of *retaining* love in his shorter second book. In 11. 6, he addresses hypothetical problems of infidelity, starting with what is to happen if a woman discovers that her partner also loves a second woman. Unless it is

⁵³ The 'sound plan' which enabled Jason to succeed was that of Medea, whom he subsequently dumped, to his cost (see Ch. 1, Ovid 1): this is very cryptic.

⁵⁴ On *Aureolus* see Ch. 2, Jerome 12 and n. Ovid wrote a lost tragedy entitled *Medea*.

⁵⁵ Characteristic wordplay: *det tibi Deus omnipotens omnipotentis femine fallacia non falli*.

* Tr. P. G. Walsh, *Andreas Capellanus on Love* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 243 and 305-21. © 1982 by P. G. Walsh. Reprinted by permission of Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd.

a case of casual sex with 'someone's maid', the opinion given is that the first woman should reject him, but that stratagems for retrieving his full allegiance are possible. It transpires that more stringent criteria apply if the boot is on the other foot.

1 (11. 6.15) But now let us investigate the primeval sin, and see what should be done if a woman breaks faith with her lover. The long-standing opinion of some authorities has sought to claim that the same conventions should be wholly preserved in the case of a deceiving woman as were stated in the case of the deceiving lover.⁵⁶ But though this opinion is an ancient one, its age should not be revered because it launches on us the greatest error.

2 (16) God forbid that I should ever proclaim a pardon for a woman who was not ashamed to satisfy two men's lusts. Such behaviour is tolerated in men because of the prevailing convention and that privilege of the sex by which the performance of all shameful acts in this world is naturally more freely permitted to men. But in the case of a woman, the modesty of her chaste sex accounts it so wicked that once a woman has lent herself to the pleasure of several men, she is considered a lewd harlot, reckoned by all as unworthy to associate with other bands of ladies.⁵⁷ (17) So if the woman should return to her earlier lover, it is considered quite shameful for him to enjoy her embraces further, for he can realize with the certainty of truth that love in no sense continues in her case. So why should he repose his affections in her?

Why Not to Love Women

Book III of Andreas's work is not so much an Ovidian *Remedia* or guide to the removal of love's torments for those who find themselves unloved (as promised in the work's preface) as it is an outright repudiation of love. It runs through a medley of religious, moral, and prudential arguments: sexual love offends God, damages friendships, prompts violence and perjury and other crimes, is a form of enslavement, entails loss of public esteem, brings one under the devil's sway, and debilitates the body. Latterly Andreas seems to indicate clearly that, even though he is adopting a standpoint whereby 'fornication with a woman' is perceived to disfigure male dignity, he will refrain from using 'analysis of the nature or condition of woman' as a disincentive. To do so would be to broach a 'distasteful and tedious' topic and could be interpreted as a condemnation of Nature (111. 52-3).⁵⁸ Two pages

⁵⁶ See Ch. 2, Jerome 26 and n.

⁵⁷ Andreas refuses a 'remedy' for anyone who loves such a woman (11. 19), and repeats in 111. 28 that sexual freedoms are allowed to males because of their 'recklessness' (*audacia*), but reduce women to whores.

⁵⁸ A point insisted on by Christine de Pizan: see Ch. 9, *Letter 1*, and *City 1. 8.3*. In *Ag.*

ANTIFEMINIST TALES

the wall, so that the man may not hurt himself on them; there not a log remains on the hearth; there is he loved and served and given everything he wants—chicken and other fowl; there is he lord and master; there is he washed and combed and his hair parted. For I tell you once again, according to the proverb: she who would have her husband soothe her tail must pile endearments on his head.

26 You who despise women, think of those endearments in that hour when she is under you and you on top. He who would experience that joy must give up to his beloved a great part of his will, no matter how much it grieves him to do so.¹⁶ A man who is not distressed from time to time is neither kind nor honest. For if my wife scolds and says nasty things to me, all I need do is leave and she stops. Anyone who tried to answer her would be reasoning with madness.¹⁷ And it is better for me to go away than to hit her with a piece of wood. Lords, you who are submissive, deceitful, and blusters, do not be dismayed in any way: submissive men have more joy than do those quarrelsome rascals who are always looking for a fight. And finally, Gautier le Leu says that he who will oppress his wife or quarrel with her only because she wants what all her neighbours want does not have a gentle heart. But I do not choose to go any deeper into this question. A woman only does what she must. The tale is done. Set up the drinks.

JACQUES DE VITRY (c. 1170–1240)

FROM SERMON 66* IN *SERMONS FOR ALL* (*SERMONES VULGARES*)

Jacques de Vitry was an ecclesiastic of great energy and wide experience. He is remembered as a committed crusader and as a supporter of the female religious movement associated with Mary of Oignies. He also popularized the use of exemplary tales (*exempla*) in his huge repertoire of sermons. One collection of these, the *Sermones vulgares*, is written with an eye to numerous professions and social groups, and is packed with *exempla* which were later extracted to form one of the period's anthologies of ready-to-use preachers' stories.¹⁸ Jacques includes three sermons 'to married people' (*ad coniugatos*) of which the first is represented below.¹⁹ The sermon as a whole offers an

¹⁶ Conciliatory remarks which qualify the antifeminism of 'The Widow': Johnson 1983, 305–6.

¹⁷ On Irrationality, cf. Ch. 4, Andreas 9; and Ch. 6, *Math.* 1.

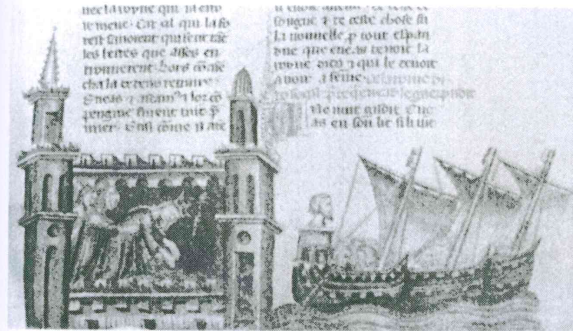
* New translation by Alcuin Blamires from a transcription of the Latin text in MS B.N. Lat. 17509 (fos. 135–137^v). Kindly supplied by David D'Avray.

¹⁸ The *exempla* are translated in Crane 1890.

¹⁹ Discussed in D'Avray and Tausche 1980.



1. *Pasiphaë and the 'Bull'* (here interpreted as a man with a bull's nature). Detail from a manuscript of Christine de Pizan, *Épître d'Othéa*, Ch. XLV, illuminated by Willem Vrelant (c. 1460). Universitätsbibliothek, Erlangen, MS 26361, fo. 59^r.



2. *Aeneas' Departure: Dido Commits Suicide by Falling on a Sword*. *Histoire Universelle* (Neapolitan, 1352–62), British Library, MS Royal 20. D. 1, fo. 199^r.

important reminder that misogynistic sentiment was constantly entwined with perspectives sympathetic to women. He begins by insisting on monogamy, and condemning promiscuous men. He goes on to touch on themes frequently found in commentary on marriage. Woman was created from the rib, not from foot or head, as a sign that she is man's 'companion',²⁰ and should be treated as such, not left half-starved at home while the husband boozes all day. If he beats her on his return, he must share her guilt should she abandon him for another man. God did not intend woman to be downtrodden, for He gave her special privileges.²¹ After its denunciations of drunken husbands, however, the sermon switches forcibly into antifeminist mode.

1 Woman was not created from man's head, in case she should be inflated with arrogance towards man. 'I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man.'²² Also, 'A woman, if she have superiority, is contrary to her husband.'²³ 'Let wives be subject to their husbands ... just as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him "lord".'²⁴ For after woman sinned she was told: 'thou shalt be under thy husband's power',²⁵ that is, in being obedient to him; and a husband ought to take precedence over his wife, in ruling over her. But some wives are unwilling to be subject: they would rather take precedence, and they don't just despise their husbands, they lash out and beat them. ... They always want to propose to put their will before their husbands' will. 'This is my will, and this is what I command: let will substitute for reason.' 'There was never a lawsuit which was not begun by a woman.' 'The marital bed is always a place of dispute and mutual bickering.' 'A wife's dowry is quarrelling.'²⁶ Then in Ecclesiasticus; 'It will be more agreeable to abide with a lion and a dragon than to dwell with a wicked woman.'²⁷

2 I have heard of one bad woman who was so antagonistic towards her husband that she always opposed him, and did the contrary of his orders.²⁸ Whenever he invited people to a meal and asked her to receive the guests cheerfully, she did the opposite, and exasperated

²⁰ A commonplace: cf. Ch. 8, *Dives* 1.
²¹ Her creation (i) *inside* paradise, and (ii) not from earth; and (iii) God's incarnation through human mother, not father. Adopted by Christine de Pizan, Ch. 9, *Letter 10* and *City* 4.

²² 1. Tim. 2: 12.
²³ Eccles. 25: 30, in Ch. 1, *Scripture* 9; and cf. Ch. 8, *Albertano* 1 and 4.

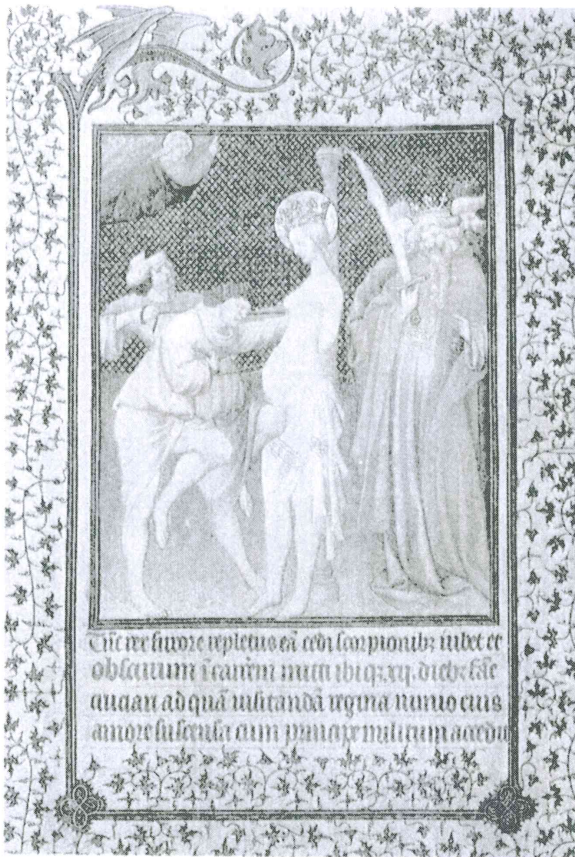
²⁴ 1 Peter 3: 1, 6.

²⁵ Gen. 3: 16.

²⁶ A string of three quotations from *Juv. Satire* VI, 223, 242, 268 (see Ch. 1, *Juv.* 5-6); and a fourth from Ovid, *Art of Love* II, 155.

²⁷ Eccles. 25: 23.

²⁸ Cf. Ch. 4, *Andreas* 15.



12. *Catherine of Alexandria Bound to a Column*. *Belles Heures* of Jean, Duke of Berry, illuminated by the Limbourg brothers (c. 1406-9). New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection (54.1.1, fo. 17').

her husband very much. One day, when this man had invited some people to a meal, he had the table put up in his garden near a river. But she, sitting between it and the water, looked at the men who had been invited with a surly face, and kept herself some distance from the table. Her husband said, 'Be cheerful to our guests, and come nearer the table.' Hearing this, she immediately moved further away from the table, getting closer to the river bank behind her back. Her waiting husband now angrily said 'Come to the table!' But determined to do the opposite, she lunged so far away from the table that she fell into the river and, her breath stifled, disappeared.

3 With a show of grief he got into a boat and, steering *against* the current of the river, searched for his wife with a long pole in the water. When his neighbours asked why he was searching upstream, when he ought to be looking downstream, he replied: 'Don't you realize that my wife is always contrarious, and never goes the right way? I'm sure she would have gone against the current, not with it as others usually do.'

The middle of the sermon concentrates largely on a couple's equal obligations so far as sexual intercourse within marriage is concerned, but, Jacques continues:

4 It is clear that however much a married couple is equal as regards the carnal debt, in other things the husband is his wife's head,²⁹ to rule her, correct her (if she strays), and restrain her (so she does not fall headlong). For hers is a slippery and weak sex, not to be trusted too easily. Wanton woman is slippery like a snake and as mobile as an eel;³⁰ so she can hardly be guarded or kept within bounds. Some things are so bare that there is nothing by which to get hold of them. Just as whoever tries to grasp a sunbeam opens his hand to find it holds nothing, and just as a round glass container lacking handles to hold is not easily grasped by the hand and quickly slips away, so it is with woman: roving and lecherous once she has been stirred by the devil's hoe.³¹ Put a frog on a silk cloth and it'll never rest until it jumps back into the mud; it cannot stay in a clean place.

5 She will bring tears to your eyes—but *their* eyes are schooled in

²⁹ Cf. Ch. 3, Gratian 2.

³⁰ Cf. 'eel in the Seine', Ch. 6, RR 21. 'Wanton' here translates *multivola* ('wanting many'), found in Catullus 68. 128.

³¹ Reading *rastro* for MS *restro*, as suggested by D'Avray.

weeping.³² Do not believe her, because 'the iniquity of a man is better than a well-meaning woman'.³³ When the time comes she will spread her wings, since if an opportunity discloses itself she'll fly off and quit. In this respect woman can be called a virtuoso artist, as they say; because she has one skill—that is, one way of deceiving—more than the devil.

6 I heard of one woman whose husband so kept watch on her that he would never allow her to go out without him. Being devious, she began to ponder how she could trick her guardian. Eventually she indicated to her lover (or rather, adulterer) that he should wait for her in a particular house. When she came in front of that house, she allowed herself to fall over into a lot of mud, pretending that her feet had slipped. Since all her clothing was filthy, she said to her husband: 'Wait here at the entrance, because I shall have to take my clothes off and clean them in this house.' But once she had gone in, she spent a long while with the adulterer, came out in cleaned clothes, and thus deceived her husband.

³² Jacques adapts a passage on women's tears in Ovid, *Cures for Love* 687–90.

³³ Ecclesiastes 42: 14, in Ch. 1, Scripture 10.

A Woman Defends Women

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 girliness'.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 Leesece*. 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 *Leesece*, 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 *Leesece* 1155–61.

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

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.

FROM THE LETTER OF THE GOD OF LOVE* (L'ÉPISTRE AU DIEU D'AMOURS: 1399)

This poem assumes the form of an Official Statement by the God of Love, publishing the complaints lodged at his court by multitudes of women concerning their mistreatment by false lovers and protesting especially against the defamation arising from men's casual talk of sexual conquest. What is the point of such defamation, it is asked, among those who ought rather to be the protectors of women's honour?

1 (168) Every man should feel affection in his heart for woman, who is mother to each and every one of them, and who, rather than being horrible or cruel to him, is gentle, sweet, and loving, offering compassion and help when he needs them. She has done so much for him and continues to do so, for her actions are very effectively designed to nurture a man's body gently. From his birth, through life to death, women help and succour him, providing compassion, sweetness, and support.⁷ And if a man refuses to acknowledge this and, lacking in gratitude, harshly slanders them, my response is to repeat my view that a man who utters defamatory remarks, insults, or reproaches against women by criticizing them (whether it be one, two of them or women in general) offends against nature.⁸

2 (185) Let us suppose that there do exist stupid women, or those tainted with every conceivable vice, faithless and incapable of love or loyalty, proud, vicious, full of cruelty, inconstant, fickle, flighty, false, deceitful, and given to trickery: should we because of this lock them

⁶ Christine de Pizan 1982, p. xxxiii.

⁷ New translation by Karen Pratt from the Old French text in *Œuvres Poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed. Maurice Roy, II (Paris: SATF, 1891); see also Fenster and Eiler 1991. © Karen Pratt 1992.

⁸ The natural debt to woman as mother is argued in e.g. Ch. 8, Marbod 3–5; also *Leesece* 1026–36; and *Bien des Fames* 19 ff. in Fiero et al. 1989, 107–9.

⁹ The charge of 'ingratitude' recurs in *City* I, 8.9, I, 38.4. Andreas also refers to the 'offence to nature' in antifeminism: *On Love* III, 52–3.

all up and claim that there is not a single one of any worth? When God on high made and created the angels, cherubim, seraphim, and archangels, were there not some whose deeds were evil? Should one therefore call all angels evil? But let any man who knows an evil woman be wary of her, without casting aspersions on a third or quarter of all women and without criticizing women in general and condemning their female ways.⁹ For there have been many, still are and will be, who are virtuous and fair and hence deserve our praise, women in whom we find virtue and good qualities, and whose kindness amply demonstrates their good sense and worth.

Attacking vices is one thing; condemning individuals by name is another—indeed, it is disallowed by God. The slanderers should ponder the better example set by exponents of chivalry such as Othon de Grandson. But Christine now turns our attention to the inheritance of literary 'defamation'.

3 (259) The aforementioned ladies complain about many clerks who attribute all sorts of faults to them and who compose works about them in rhyme, prose, and verse, criticizing their conduct in a variety of different ways. They then give these works as elementary textbooks to their young pupils at the beginning of their schooling, to provide them with exempla and received wisdom, so that they will remember this teaching when they come of age.¹⁰ In their verse treatises these clerks say that Adam, David, Samson, Solomon, and countless other men were brought down by women morning, noon, and night. Is there therefore a man alive who would be able to protect himself from them? Another says that women are very deceitful, scheming, false, and of little worth. Others say that they are great liars, fickle, inconstant, and flighty. They accuse them of many another serious vice and are very critical of them, finding no excuse for them whatsoever.

4 (277) This is the way clerks behave day and night, composing their verse now in French, now in Latin. And they base their opinions on goodness only knows which books, which are more mendacious than a drunk. Ovid, in a book he wrote called *Cures for Love*, says many evil things about women, and I think he was wrong

⁹ On unjust generalization, cf. Ch. 8, *S. Passion* 6, and Albertano 3; and Ch. 1, Ovid 7. Generalization is supported in Ch. 6, *Math.* 26, 31.

¹⁰ Christine specifies Ovid's *Remedia amoris* as one of these 'elementary textbooks' in 4 below. Ovid seems to have been studied in schools from at least the 11th c. Cf. Ch. 6, *RR* 3 commenting that Theophrastus' book is 'a good one to study in school'; and on Adam, Samson, etc., cf. Ch. 8, *Dives* 9.

to do this. He accuses them of gross immorality, of filthy, vile, and wicked behaviour. (I disagree with him that they have such vices and promise to champion them in the fight against anyone who would like to throw down the gauntlet. I mean, of course, honourable women, for I do not include worthless ones in what I have to say.) Thus, clerks have studied this book since their early childhood as their grammar primer and then teach it to others so that no man will undertake to love a woman. . . .

5 (309) And if anyone says that we ought to believe books written by reputable men of sound judgement, who never debased themselves by lying, yet demonstrated the wickedness of women, my response is that those men who wrote such things in their books, I have discovered, never sought to do anything but deceive women in their private lives; nor could they get enough of them: they wanted a different woman every day and couldn't be faithful even to the most beautiful. How many did David have, or King Solomon? This angered God and he punished them for their excess. There were many others like them, notably Ovid, who lusted after so many women, then had the nerve to slander them. And all those clerks, who had so much to say about them, were—more than other men—maddened with lust not for just one, but for thousands of them!¹¹ Now if such men had ladies or wives who refused to pander to their every whim or who concentrated their efforts on cheating them, what is so surprising about that? For there can be no doubt that, when a man plunges into such filth, he certainly does not seek out worthy ladies or virtuous, modest women of good character: these women he neither knows nor has anything to do with. He wants only those who suit his purpose, and has a constant supply of tarts and whores on his arm. Does a rake deserve to possess anything of worth, since he chases everything in skirts and then imagines he can successfully hide his shame by slandering them with complex arguments once he has grown old and is past it?¹² But if they were to criticize only fallen and loose women, and were to advise against pursuing them (for pursue them is what these men actually did), then some good could come of it. For this would be a very reasonable thing to do, worthy, fair, and commendable advice, and would not be defamatory to women in general.

¹¹ This psychological explanation is echoed in Ch. 8, *Dives* 17, and expanded with reference to Ovid in *City* 1. 9.2, where a story that Ovid was embittered by castration is borrowed from *Lesce* 2709–22.

¹² Cf. Ch. 7, *WoB* 47.

6 (348) And if we turn now to the question of deceit, I simply cannot conceive of or comprehend just how a woman might deceive a man. She isn't the one who pursues him or tracks him down, seeking his love or begging for his favours at his house.¹³ She does not constantly think about him or have him on her mind, whereas man comes round to deceive and seduce her. How does he seduce her? In such a way that no trouble is too great for him, and there is no burden he will not bear in order to have her. He has no other diversion, devoting himself exclusively to seducing women, dedicating his heart, body, and wealth to the task. It often happens that this period of privation and trial lasts a long time, yet they frequently fail in their aims, even though they try very hard. These are the men Ovid speaks about in his poem on the *Art of Love*; for out of the deep sympathy he felt for them he composed a book in which he describes and teaches them openly how to seduce women through trickery and to win their love. He called this work the *Art of Love*, but, far from teaching the rules and conventions of noble love, it teaches the very opposite. For any man who decides to put into practice the precepts of this book will never love properly, however much he may be loved. For this reason, this book is inappropriately named: it is in fact a book on the art of sheer deceit and dissimulation—that is what I call it.

7 (379) Yet if women are so flighty, fickle, changeable, susceptible, and inconstant (as some clerks would have us believe), why is it that their suitors have to resort to such trickery to have their way with them? And why don't women quickly succumb to them, without the need for all this skill and ingenuity in conquering them? For there is no need to go to war for a castle that is already captured. And the same applies to a poet as skilful as Ovid, who was later sent into exile, or Jean de Meun in his *Romance of the Rose*—what a long-winded business that is! What a complicated task! What well-known and recondite knowledge he brings to bear on this, and what great adventures are involved. And the help of so many people sought and requested and so much effort, and so many tricks devised in order to seduce a mere slip of a girl (for this is the ultimate aim) with deceit and guile. Is a violent attack necessary then against a weak and defenceless site? How can one perform a great leap from such close quarters? I simply cannot see or understand why it requires such an

¹³ The argument that men, not women, are sexual predators is in *Leesce*, 2970 ff., 3846 ff., and Ch. 8 above. *S. Passion* 2, *Gower* 2, *Dives* 17.

enormous effort, skill, ingenuity, and great cunning to capture a weak place.¹⁴

8 (402) Therefore, since it is necessary to call on such skill, ingenuity, and effort in order to seduce a woman, whether of high or humble birth, the logical conclusion to draw is that women are by no means as fickle as some men claim, or as easily influenced in their behaviour. And if anyone tells me that books are full of women like these, it is this very reply, frequently given, which causes me to complain. My response is that women did not write these books nor include the material which attacks them and their morals. Those who plead their cause in the absence of an opponent can invent to their heart's content, can pontificate without taking into account the opposite point of view and keep the best arguments for themselves, for aggressors are always quick to attack those who have no means of defence.¹⁵ But if women had written these books, I know full well the subject would have been handled differently.¹⁶ They know that they stand wrongfully accused, and that the cake has not been divided up equally, for the strongest take the lion's share, and the one who does the sharing out keeps the biggest portion for himself.

The loyalty of Medea, Dido, and Penelope disproves allegations of women's fickleness.¹⁷ In fact it is because women are so often victims of male deceit that they have to be wary. The God of Love will punish men who turn against him and against women: worse still are those who besiege women till they give in, then generalize that women are easy prey.

9 (559) But, whoever may have slandered or denigrated them in their writings, I can find no ill spoken of women in any book or work on the subject of Jesus, His life and death (the latter brought about by envy), nor in the acts of the Apostles, who endured great suffering for the faith, nor in any gospel,¹⁸ but instead women are attributed with many a virtue, many an important act, great wisdom, good sense and unwavering constancy, perfect love, unshakeable faith, great charity, a determined will, a strong and steadfast heart eager to serve

¹⁴ The 'siege' metaphor is prominent in *RR*; and cf. Ch. 1, Ovid 6.

¹⁵ This is the germ of Christine's idea for the well-defended 'City' of Ladies: cf. *City* 1.

¹⁶ Cf. Ch. 7, *WoB* 47.

¹⁷ On Medea, see Ch. 6, *RR* 27; on all three, see Ch. 1, Ovid 7.

¹⁸ Christine again emphasizes a favourable attitude to women in the New Testament and in Christian legend (as against the misogyny of pagan literature) in *City* III, 18.1.

God; and they gave ample proof of these qualities, for they did not abandon Him in life or death. Sweet Jesus, injured, wounded, or dead, was forsaken by everyone except for the women.¹⁹ The whole of our faith rests on that of a woman. Thus, a man who denigrates women is a fool indeed, if only because of the respect owed to the Queen of Heaven, in acknowledgement of her goodness, for she was so noble and worthy that she deserved to bear the son of God! God the Father honoured women greatly when He decided that she should be His wife and mother, the temple of God united with the Trinity. A woman should rightly be joyful and glad, since she shares the same form as the Virgin; for God never created anything as worthy or as perfect, apart from Jesus incarnate. Thus, anyone who criticizes women in any way at all is a real fool, since a woman sits on such a lofty throne next to her son and at our Father's right hand; a great honour indeed for woman as mother.²⁰ Nor do we ever find sweet Jesus denigrating them: instead He loved and held them in high esteem.

10 (595) God created woman in His noble image²¹ and bestowed upon her the wisdom and insight necessary to achieve salvation, and the gift of understanding. He also gave her a most noble shape and she was created out of very noble material; for she was not fashioned out of the clay of the earth, but exclusively out of the rib of man, whose body was at that stage, to tell the truth, the most noble part of earthly creation.²² And the authentic Old Testament stories in the Bible, which cannot be untrue, tell us that woman, not man, was created first in earthly paradise;²³ but as far as the deception is concerned, for which our mother Eve is blamed and which resulted in God's harsh sentence, I can assure you that she never did deceive Adam, but innocently swallowed and believed the words of the devil, which she thought were sincere and true, and with this conviction she went on to tell her husband. There was therefore neither trickery nor deceit in this, for innocence devoid of all hidden malice should

¹⁹ Cf. Ch. 8, Abelard 2–3, *S. Passion* 1.

²⁰ Cf. Ch. 8, Abelard 7, Albertano 3.

²¹ Christine's insistence that woman was created 'in God's image' has to be seen against a history of theological controversy: cf. Ch. 2, Augustine 5; Ch. 3, Gratian 4, 10; and d'Alverny 1977. The points in this paragraph are further developed in *City* 4 below.

²² Cf. Ch. 8, *Response to Richard* 1–4; also in *Leesce* 1210–25.

²³ Cf. Ch. 2, Ambrose 2; Ch. 8, Abelard 6; *Leesce* 1226–8.

not be called deception.²⁴ No one deceives without intending to deceive, otherwise it is not real deception. . . .

11 (643) If one judges the matter correctly, one will discover that the so-called 'greatest evil' is capable of doing little harm. Women do not kill anyone, wound or torture them; they do not plot or carry out treacherous acts, they are not arsonists, nor do they disinherit anyone, administer poison, steal gold or silver, trick people out of their possessions or lawful inheritance, through fraudulent contracts, nor harm kingdoms, duchies, or empires.²⁵ They are hardly a source of evil, not even the worst of them. Usually one exception does not make a general rule. And if anyone wishes to insult me by citing historical or biblical examples of one, two, or several women who were wicked and reprehensible, they are still exceptional, for I am speaking about women in general and there are very few who indulge in such tricks.

12 (661) If someone says to me that women's nature and character are not conducive to their waging war, killing people, or kindling tinder to start fires, or committing similar acts, and that therefore no credit, praise, or advantage can or should be attached to them for avoiding or resisting such actions, my response, with due respect for the speaker, is to agree that their hearts are not predisposed to such behaviour nor to committing acts of cruelty. For woman's nature is noble, very compassionate, timid, and timorous. She is humble, gentle, self-effacing, and full of charity, loveable, devout, and quietly modest. She fears war, is innocent and pious; when annoyed, her anger is quick to subside; she cannot bear to witness cruelty or suffering, and in a word, this is the female character, which clearly stems from her nature.

13 (681) And any woman who is, by chance, not like this, is quite wrongly acting against her nature. For cruelty is reprehensible in a woman, who should be the source of pure gentleness. And because they are not accustomed or predisposed to shed blood or to kill, or to commit other heinous, ugly, and terrible crimes, and are therefore innocent of and indeed exempt from the greatest and most serious sins (for everyone is stained with some vice), they will therefore not

²⁴ Cf. Ch. 8, *Dives* 11. Christine's *simplement* ('innocently', 612) and *simplece* ('innocence', 617) attribute to Eve a quality much prized in women at this period.

²⁵ One of Christine's favourite themes: cf. *City* 15 below; also in Ch. 8, *Marbod* 6, *Dives* 10; and in *Leesce* 1177 ff., 3927 ff.

be found guilty of or be caught in the act of committing great misdeeds; thus, they will not be punished for them with either torments or suffering, because they are not guilty. Hence I can say, without being heretical, that God on high favoured them greatly in creating them without those qualities which make one likely to be damned;²⁶ for inclinations lead to actions, the results of which for many people weigh heavily on their souls. Thus it is much better not to have the inclination in the first place, which, if satisfied, would result in eternal death.

All this proves that men should not attack but cherish women; slanderers gain only a bad reputation anyway. Every man comes from a woman, and it is natural for woman—mother, sister, girlfriend—to bring him joy. Man is not disparaged by woman's worth, which passes from mother to son. But these things are said not to flatter women's vanity but to stir them to become yet more worthy. As for men who defame or trick women, the heaviest penalties of the God of Love are pronounced against them.

FROM *THE QUARREL OF THE ROSE** (*LA QUERELLE DE LA ROSE*: C. 1400–C. 1403)

Christine was a key protagonist in a literary debate about the moral value of the *Romance of the Rose* which seems to have flared up at the time she was writing the *Letter of the God of Love*. Dignitaries of court and church took sides. Gontier and Pierre Col defending the *Rose* with Jean de Montreuil, and the Chancellor of the University of Paris formidably reinforcing Christine's own distaste for the poem. She thought Jean de Meun's part of the *Rose* rather dissolute; she censured among other things the use of indecent language, the condoning of deceitful behaviour, and the denigration of women. But since the exchange of letters is quite complex, brief excerpts only are given here to exemplify the debate about antifeminism and also to show what condescension Christine had to tolerate on the part of her male opponents.

Christine's Letter to Jean de Montreuil (1401): On the Speech of Genius, and Jean de Meun's Antifeminism

1 (16/163) What good can possibly come from it, and what point is there in [Jean de Meun's] excessive, violent, and totally unfounded criticism, denigration, and defamation of women, insofar as he claims that they are guilty of many a terrible vice and that their

²⁶ Repeated in *City* 1. 14.2.

* New translation by Karen Pratt, with page and line references to the Old French edition by Eric Hicks, *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* (Paris: Champion, 1977). For translation of the whole *Quarrel* see Baird and Kane, 1978. © Karen Pratt 1992.

behaviour is perverse in every conceivable way; yet, despite all the talking and the like each of his characters indulges in, he can never get his fill of the subject. For if you wish to tell me that the Jealous Man does this because he is governed by passion, I fail to see how it fits in with the role of Genius to encourage and urge men to go to bed with women without omitting to perform the act which he praises so highly. And Genius is the one who, more than any of the other characters, fulminates so vehemently against women, saying, in fact, 'Flee, flee, flee the venomous serpent.' Then he tells men to pursue them relentlessly.²⁷ There is a terrible contradiction here in ordering men to flee what he wishes them to pursue, and to pursue what he wishes them to flee. But since women are so perverse, he should not have commanded men to approach them at all; for he who fears harm ought to keep well out of its way. Thus he strongly forbids a man to reveal his secrets to a woman, who is so keen to discover them (so he claims, although I really do not know where the devil he found so much nonsense and irrelevant arguments, which he sets out in great detail). But I ask all those who really believe that his teaching is true and place so much faith in it, to tell me if they can how many men they have seen accused, killed, hanged, or publicly defamed by the accusations of their women?

Christine's Letter to Gontier Col (1401): 'Excessive Emotion'

2 (25/19) After you had read and thoroughly scrutinized my letter and since your erroneous position had been undermined and deflated by the truth, you wrote in a fit of impatience your second, more insulting, letter, criticizing me as a member of the female sex (which you claim to be excessively emotional by nature²⁸) and accusing me of folly and presumption in daring to correct and contradict a teacher as renowned, well qualified and learned as you declare the author [Jean de Meun] of that work to be. Therefore you urge me insistently to recant and repent, after which mercy and compassion will still be extended to me, but if I do not, I shall be treated just like the publican.²⁹

²⁷ Genius bids men flee from women (RR 35) yet afterwards summons all men to procreate (19505 ff.); so (Christine argues) his antifeminism does not project credible 'characterization' even if the Jealous Husband's does.

²⁸ Gontier's *impatience* is ironically juxtaposed with his allegation that Christine's *femmenin sexe is passionné*: cf. Ch. 6, Corb. 1, describing woman as a creature *passionato da mille passioni*.

²⁹ Matt. 9: 10 ff.

3 (25/29) Oh superior and ingenious intellect! Do not deliberately allow your keen mind to be clouded and narrow in its views. Consider the matter clearly and fairly, guided by the methods of the queen of learning—theology—and, far from condemning what I have written, you will ask yourself whether those particular passages I have criticized really do deserve to be praised. And moreover, you should carefully note throughout the work those things I take issue with and those I do not. And if you despise my arguments so much because of the inadequacy of my intellect, which you denigrate with the words 'like a woman [emotional by nature]' etc., rest assured that I do not consider this insulting or in any way defamatory, since I derive comfort from the knowledge that there are, have been, and continue to be huge numbers of excellent women who were and are highly praiseworthy and thoroughly versed in all the virtues, whom I would prefer to resemble than to be enriched with all of fortune's gifts. Furthermore, if for this reason you still insist on belittling my forceful arguments with your antifeminist attacks, please remember that a small dagger or knife point can pierce a great sack bulging and bursting with material possessions; and surely you know that a little weasel can attack a great lion and sometimes put it to flight. So, even if you threaten me with your insults and subtle reasoning, methods which generally create fear in the faint-hearted, do not for one moment think that I am fickle in my opinions or that my mind might easily be changed.³⁰

Christine's Reply to Pierre Col (1402): Ambrose and Ecclesiasticus

Gontier Col's brother, Pierre, has joined in the fray on Jean de Meun's side. In responding to his letter, Christine notes his claim that St Ambrose somewhere criticizes women more harshly than Jean, on grounds of their habitual deceit.

4 (135/652) You say that St Ambrose was more critical of the female sex than [Jean] was, for he says that it is a sex practised in deception. My reply to this is that surely you are well aware that the pronouncements of the Church Fathers, and even the sermons of Jesus Christ himself, were meant to be understood on two levels. Thus it is necessary to realize that St Ambrose did not make such a statement against women themselves, for I am convinced that the good man would have wished to condemn only vice. For he knew full

³⁰ Christine pointedly eschews the 'fickleness' (*légèreté*) attributed to women, as she notes in *Letter 7* above.

well that there were many holy women, but he wanted to say that it is because of the female sex that man frequently betrays his own soul.³¹ Similarly, when Solomon said that the misdeed of a man is better than the good deed of a woman,³² we know that it is wrong to take this literally. Yet Solomon himself can serve as an example of this; for the misdeed of a man would have been far better for him, whatever the circumstances, than any goodness he could see in the woman with whom he was so infatuated that he took to worshipping idols.³³ Solomon's statement could also be read as a prophecy, for the misdeed of Judas has been of far greater worth to us than the good deed of Judith, who killed Holofernes, or of any other woman.

FROM *THE CITY OF LADIES** (*LE LIVRE DE LA CITÉ DES DAMES* (1405-))

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-

³¹ Christine appeals to the argument for male responsibility, as in Ch. 8, Gower 2, *Dives* 19.

³² *Eccles.* 42: 14; in Ch. 1, *Scripture* 10.

³³ 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).