

The Book of the City of Ladies

by Christine de Pizan



Shortly after Christine de Pizan's birth (ca. 1364-1430), her father accepted an appointment as court astrologer and physician to King Charles V of France, and the family moved to Paris. Educated by her father and court tutors, Christine acquired literacy in Italian, French, and Latin. She knew some classical texts and was widely acquainted with medieval learning. Also, she married one of the French king's legal secretaries, and so learned something about *ars dictaminis* and legal script. Few medieval women could have received a better education.

In 1390, her father, her husband, and their patron, the French king, died within a short time. Christine was left at age twenty-five with major debts and three children, a young niece, and an elder mother to support. She turned to writing, apparently making some money by copying legal documents. But Christine had higher ambitions, both literary and financial. She first achieved fame—an lucrative noble patronage for her poetic ballads. Her loyalty and skill earned her the commission from Charles V's brother to write a history of the king's reign.

Christine also produced several writings that describe her own intellectual and spiritual journey. Scholars have characterized them as the first examples of autobiography as that genre would come to be known in the West, and they are strikingly modern in their account of female psychology.

Against Those Men Who Claim It is Not Good for Women to be Educated

Following these remarks, I, Christine, spoke, "My lady, I realize that women have accomplished many good things and that even if evil women have done evil, it seems to me, nevertheless, that the benefits accrued and still accruing because of good women—particularly the wise and literary ones and those educated in the natural sciences whom I mentioned above—outweigh the evil. Therefore, I am amazed by the opinion of some men who claim that they do not want their daughters, wives, or kinswomen to be educated because their mores would ruin as a result.

de Pizan, Christine. "From *The Book of the City of Ladies*." Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 2nd ed. Ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. 540-541, 544-545. Print.

She responded, “Here you can clearly see that not all opinions of men are based on reason and that these men are wrong. For it must not be presumed that mores necessarily grow worse from knowing the moral sciences, which teach the virtues, indeed there is not the slightest doubt that moral education amends and ennobles them. How could anyone think or believe that whoever follows good teaching or doctrine is the worse for it? Such an opinion cannot be expressed or maintained. I do not mean that it would be good for a man or a woman to study the art of divination or those fields of learning which are forbidden—for the holy Church did not remove them from common use without good reason—but it should not be believed that women are the worse for knowing what is good.

“Quintus Horensius, a great rhetorician and consummately skilled orator in Rome, did not share this opinion. He had a daughter, named Hortensia, whom he greatly loved for the subtlety of her wit. He had her learn letters and study the science of rhetoric, which she mastered so thoroughly that she resembled her father Hortensius not only in wit and lively memory but also in her excellent delivery and order of speech—in fact, he surpassed her in nothing. As for the subject discussed above, concerning the good which comes about through women, the benefits realized by this woman and her learning were, among others, exceptionally remarkable. That is, during the time when Rome was governed by three men, this Hortensia began to support the cause of women and to undertake what no man dared to undertake. There was a question whether certain taxes should be levied on women and on their jewelry during a needy period in Rome. This woman’s eloquence was so compelling that she was listened to, no less readily than her father would have been, and she won her case.

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

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

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And I, Christine, replied to all of this, “Indeed, my lady, what you say is as true as the Lord’s Pryaer.”