CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

The Book of the City of Ladies: 
Against Those Men Who Claim It Is 
Not Good for Women to Be Educated

1404

Christine de Pizan (ca. 1363–1434) may have been the first European woman to earn her living as a writer. After de Pizan’s birth in Venice, her father became a physician and astrologer at the French court, where Christine studied languages and the classics. In 1390, when her husband died in an epidemic and left her with three children, Christine began her literary career. Her works were popular among the French nobility, and she even enjoyed the financial support of the French queen. Humanists were divided in their opinions on the education of women. Some thought women were simply not capable of learning. Others thought a limited form of education in good morals was sufficient. Christine challenged both these ideas, and some scholars now regard her as one of the first Western feminists.

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

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 Hortensius, 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 subtility 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. . . . 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. . . .

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. [My] 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.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. How does Christine defend a woman’s ability to learn?
2. What examples of learned women does she provide?
3. According to Christine, why do some men not want to see women educated?