Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance

Italy, France, and England

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Queens. See Power, Politics, and Women.

Querelle des Femmes (Controversy on Women)
Criticism of the vices and praise for the attractions of women are perennial topics in literature, but only at a few moments in history have writers in favor of women engaged in formal debate with misogynists to challenge fundamental negative assumptions about women. The European Renaissance was one such period. From the late fourteenth century through the seventeenth century, traditional misogynist assertions that women were naturally weak, tended to vice, and could not be trusted to behave well without male supervision in domestic or social situations were answered by carefully reasoned, innovative arguments in favor of women’s capacity for moral virtue, physical endurance, and intellectual accomplishment and by proposals for changes in the organization of social and domestic life appropriate to the revised notion of women. During this period, the negative and the positive attitudes toward women were juxtaposed with each other in pairs or series of texts devoted exclusively to discussing womankind and also appeared in tracts dealing with other topics related to women, such as marriage and domestic economy. Scholars refer to this formal debate by the French term querelle des femmes (dispute about women), in part because the debate was very popular in France and in part because scholars first became aware of the debate when examining French texts, but interest in the topic was pan-European. Authors in every country participated in the debate, and well over one hundred texts on the subject were produced.

The Renaissance dispute about women was a development of an already active medieval querelle but differed from it in the prowoman texts’ push toward a deep reconsideration of the nature of woman. The earlier debate was characterized by the production of matched sets of arguments that did not upset fixed ideas about women’s natural inferiority. For example, antipersonal scriptural texts were confronted with prowoman scriptural texts; thus, Eve’s guilt was balanced by Mary’s virtue, but Mary was so exceptional a figure that misogynists could counter that her behavior revealed nothing positive about the nature of women in general. While retaining many of the medieval topics and continuing to rely heavily on scriptural quotation, the prowoman side of the Renaissance querelle introduced two innovations in method that made it possible to make a convincing case in favor of women: first, authors used biographical evidence drawn from myth, legend, and, most important, history and contemporary life to support revisionist claims about the nature of woman; second, they used the formal philosophical paradox to break down negative assumptions.

Biographical evidence was introduced into the defense of women by the humanists Petrarch and Boccaccio in Italy. The first extensive collection of female biographies since Plutarch, Boccaccio’s De Mulieribus Claris was enormously popular and influential. Originally written in Latin, it was translated into most of the European vernaculars; it circulated widely in manuscript and was printed early and often; it was updated several times with additions of modern lives. In his book, Boccaccio shows himself to be at a turning point in conceptualizing women. Caught between his innovative assembly of copious evidence that women have
performed many actions worthy of admiration in the arts and sciences, government, and war and his acceptance of the opinion of authorities who defined women as naturally incapable of heroic actions and as inclined to vice, he frequently interprets women’s heroic behavior as being due to a miraculous infusion of male spirit that permits them to overcome their nature in extraordinary circumstances.

For the most part, later prowoman writers in the *querelle* accepted Boccaccio’s evidence and rejected his interpretation; demonstrating that women are naturally capable of virtue, intellectual activity, and heroic feats and that cultural restraints rather than natural inability have held women back is at the heart of the Renaissance case for women. The French writer Christine de Pizan, one of the first authors to make this case and the first woman to enter the *querelle*, challenged Boccaccio on this very point in her collection of female biographies, *La Cité des dames* (The City of Ladies). She conspicuously borrowed Boccaccio’s material but used it to demonstrate a notion of woman completely opposed to Boccaccio’s extraordinary woman theory; she argued that, given the education and opportunity to act, women were the equals of men.

Though all Renaissance defenses of women incorporate biographical evidence of women’s capacities, not all defenses are straightforward in their attack on misogyny. Many humanist and sixteenth-century defenses are written in a subtle and witty philosophical genre, the formal paradox. This has sometimes caused modern readers to perceive them as a frivolous intellectual game rather than recognizing them as making a serious challenge to the status quo. Like Erasmus’s famous *Praise of Folly* (1511), these works discover valuable positive qualities in something apparently indefensible—in this case womankind. They do not necessarily reject conventional notions of woman’s nature, but rather they challenge the negative valuation put on it. For example, in both the English Sir Thomas Elyot’s brief dialogue *Defence of Good Women* (1535) and the Italian Baldessare Castiglione’s extended debate about woman and her role at court in Book III of *Il Cortegiano* (The Courtier, 1528, translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561), the prowoman speakers argue that woman’s timidity, conventionally seen as a weakness, is a strength that adapts her for her domestic role of preserving the goods that the brave, but potentially profligate, husband brings home. Although the paradoxical strategy of finding strength in weakness (used by many in addition to Elyot and Castiglione) did not lead to the opening up of new fields of activity, as a modern feminist might wish, it did lend dignity and value to the domestic work that was the lot of most women in the period, and it provided a basis for writers on household management to advise that the wife be responsible for the direction of the household. Similarly, some Renaissance paradoxical texts do not take the obvious tack of defending Eve by arguing that Adam rather than she bears ultimate responsibility for the Fall but rather discover good in Eve’s apparently bad action. For example, the unpublished early paradoxical text *De laudibus mulierum* (1487), by the Italian Bartolommeo Goggio, asserts that many benefits came from Eve’s eating of the fruit—among them, the opening of the eyes of the intellect for mankind.

Some texts supplement the strategy of showing that qualities in woman that had previously been seen as weaknesses were actually strengths with proof that, at least in the quality of intelligence, the fundamental assumption that the two sexes are naturally different (a position now known as essentialism) is incorrect; they assert that differences have a cultural cause—some even positing a golden age of equality that ended when men began to oppress women. A few authors who make this claim are the German Agrippa von Nettesheim in his much translated and highly influential *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (1529), the Italian Galeazzo Flavio Capella in his *Della eccellenza et dignità della donna*, Ludovico Ariosto
in the Orlando Furioso, and Spenser in The Faerie Queene. Many authors, including the Italians Capella and Castiglione and the Englishmen Thomas More and the author of the Dyalogue Defensive of Women proposed that women could profit from education just as much as men if they were given the opportunity. In his dialogue The Defence of Good Women, the Englishman Sir Thomas Elyot uses logic to demonstrate that women are capable of the same virtues as men—they are not timid by nature but by upbringing—and, thus, if properly educated they are capable of playing the same roles in society that men play. Elyot goes further than most English authors, however, when he endorses the political consequences of education: the dialogue concludes with the entry of Queen Zenobia, who explains that education made her capable of participating in politics. Most support intellectual activity by women, including writing and publishing, but find that political action by women is desirable only in extraordinary circumstances, for example, when there is no male heir to the throne, as was the case when Elizabeth I became queen of England.

Although the vast majority of defenses of women were written by men, women authors participated in the Renaissance querelle from its earliest days, as is shown by Frenchwoman Christine de Pisan’s Cité des dames (ca. 1405) and Italian humanist Isotta Nogarola’s Dialogue (1451) on Saint Augustine’s doctrine that Adam and Eve “sinned differently because of the inequality of the sexes, but that both sinned with equal pride” (peccaverunt impari sexu sed pari fastu). Women’s greatest participation in the early modern querelle was during the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth centuries. The Frenchwoman Catherine des Roches (1542–1587) incorporated elements of the querelle into several of her dialogues. The year 1600 saw the publication of two Italian works. Lucrezia Marinella’s On the Nobility and Excellence of Women touched on the standard topics of the querelle, in response to a specific misogynist text, and Modesta Pozzo’s (pen name, Moderata Fonte) much freer dialogue Il Merito delle donne (The Worth of Women, written ca. 1592) presented a group of women discussing a very wide range of practical issues—husbands’ vices, the value of education, and domestic economy—as well as philosophical ones. The Englishwoman Rachel Speght responded to a virulent misogynist attack in her bitingly satiric but rational and substantial proof of “Womans excellency,” A Mouzell for Melastomus (1617), and, most unusually, another Englishwoman, Aemilia Lanyer, incorporated elements of the querelle, including a defense of Eve, in the passion poem and other writings in the volume Salve Deus Rex Judeorum (1611).

Though it might seem reasonable to assume that women would have argued clearly for women’s equality or superiority, that is not so. Rather, in the tradition of the paradox, they often unsettle assumptions about women by setting their own skill as writers against the content of their works. In Nogarola’s dialogue, the male sustainer of woman’s inferiority makes the stronger case, but Nogarola, as author, simultaneously and paradoxically demonstrates a quality that he denies—women’s wit and intelligence. Similarly, Lanyer defends Eve on the grounds that she was weaker and thus cannot be held responsible, at the same time that she demonstrates her own command of a complex literary genre and urges female readers to think for themselves.

An unusual feature of the English querelle is the popular tone of many of the texts from the mid-sixteenth century onward. Rather than, or in addition to, the formal paradox and dialogue, many English authors used older genres, such as the bird debate, the dream vision, and the invective. Such works offered down-to-earth praise for women’s successful fulfillment of their roles as mothers and homemakers, and they featured in general ad hominem argument and disparagement of men nearly as often as praise of women for accomplishments in traditionally masculine fields. English publishers
often artificially stimulated a sense of crisis in the definition of woman by commissioning texts on both sides of the debate. This is true of the pamphlets that form the Schoolhouse Controversy (1541–1542 and 1557–1560) and the Swetnam Controversy (1615–1620); each is named for a misogynist text that provoked numerous prowoman responses: Edwarde Gosynhyll’s (?) *The Scholehouse of Women* (1541, 1560, 1572) and Joseph Swetnam’s *The Araignment of lewd, idle, froward and unconstant Women* (1615 and many editions thereafter). As in the more highly philosophical texts, however, the popular misogynist texts were compendia of age-old arguments, while the companion prowoman publications, though full of entertaining invective, often exhibited original thinking and made a persuasive case for women’s virtue. For example, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, the young Englishwoman Rachel Speght’s satiric defense of women, is noteworthy for its skillful deployment of scriptural evidence to refute the outrageous claims of the misogynist *Araignment of Women*. The popular appeal of the controversy in England can be seen in Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*, in which the final speech by Katherine, the female protagonist, explores the most modern ideas about woman’s social role.

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See also Education, Humanism, and Women, particularly The Humanist Curriculum; entries for the women mentioned in this article; Feminism.

Bibliography

**Primary Works**


**Secondary Works**


