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## Querelle des femmes: *A European Gender Dispute*

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Quid est mulier?

Tertullian, around 200 CE

What are Women?

Christine de Pizan, 1402

European history is rich in evidence of how differently the sexes, their peculiarities and their relationships can be perceived and interpreted. In the *querelle des sexes* these differences were debated for centuries, often in the form of complaints and accusations (this was the meaning of the French term *querelle* in the fifteenth century, which later came to mean battle or dispute) about what or how women and men are, should be, could be. More and more voices were raised during the early Renaissance, particularly in Italy, France and Spain, and the debate moved quickly to other parts of Europe. The growing significance of writing, and especially the development of writing in the European vernaculars, helped spread the discussion. Additional momentum came with the printing of books, reproduction of pictures and countless pamphlets. Both male and female authors participated in the *querelle*. Men wrote misogynistic (attacks and defamatory diatribes) as well as supportive, philogynous texts (in defence or praise of women). Most extant writings by women were philogynous. What was considered pro- or anti-women, however, depended on the respective context. Of all the views that have been passed down, only a minority had been voiced by women, but these comprised a large share of the total works written by women from that time. The origins of the dispute trace back to the Middle Ages. It developed during the Renaissance, especially under the influence of humanism and religious reform, and continued on into the Age of Enlightenment.

### The Dignity of Man and the Dignity of Woman

Are women human?

In the late Middle Ages – or the Early Renaissance in Italy – the question as to human nature was raised and answered anew. In his epochal work *On the Dignity of Man* (*De dignitate hominis*, 1486), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola spoke of men. God was speaking to Adam alone; man was to determine his own nature according to his own free will and live in his preferred form. The postulate of the dignity of man was directed against the old doctrine of *miseria humanae conditionis* (Pope Innocent III expressed this in *On the Misery of Human Life*). Women were particularly affected by the *miseria*. The Church fathers had made Eve responsible for the Fall, and identified women with sexuality and sin. To Tertullian they were ‘the devil’s gateway’ (*janua diaboli*), and Augustine regarded both extramarital and marital sexuality as sinful. Sin could only be avoided, according to St Jerome, through chaste living, since a man’s love for a woman, who embodies evil and temptation, could not be reconciled with love of God and threatened the salvation of man. Salvation-seeking men had to protect themselves from women; salvation-seeking women, from themselves. Tertullian and Chrysostomos had answered their question ‘What is a woman?’ with a long series of vices (‘enemy of friendship, necessary evil, temptation by nature, threat to the house, delightful misfortune, nature of evil’). The sexes had usually been depicted as dichotomous opposites. The scholastic synthesis of Aristotle and the Bible served to weaken the virtually Manichaean dualism (active/passive, form/matter, spirit/flesh, good/evil, merit/vice, etc.), but, like Aristotle’s ‘error of nature’, even for Thomas Aquinas, woman remained a ‘deficient’ or ‘misbegotten male’ (*mas occasionatus*). Thomas and Aristotle both assigned women an important role in the household (and Thomas insisted that both sexes were made in God’s image and thus both could be redeemed), but only under male dominion. It did not follow from the fact that women were indispensable that they had equal status. The *mas occasionatus* would long retain its – however disputed – position.

By no means did all people (or even all men) in medieval and early modern Europe think this way about mankind and women. In some sermons that did not remain inaccessible to most women – as Latin writings did – but were addressing a female audience as well, female vices were sometimes played down, and male vices were also criticized. Occasionally, this was the preacher’s response to open protests by women who felt they had been defamed.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, women could be viewed not

only as gateways of the devil but – in the case of a virtuous, virginal woman – as the ‘bride of Christ’. Both of these were abstractions that had little to do with real women, but served instead to present ‘the woman’ as a question that could be resolved only with a paradox. Starting in the twelfth century in southern France, the paradox assumed a new form – in the minnesong of the chivalrous troubadours. They dreamed of a gentlewoman whose physical distance and virginity represented the *sine qua non* of love. Nevertheless, as removed as this literature was from reality, it would have a wide and lasting effect in Europe, helping to establish new standards of deportment and cultural models.

The process of replacing the imagery of paradoxes and polar opposites was long and full of conflict, tied in many ways to actual conditions and social change. The *querelle des sexes*, which shaped early modern culture more than any other subject, dealt with the dignity and virtue of the ‘other’ sex, with its inferiority, superiority, equivalence or equality *vis-à-vis* its male counterpart. Galeazzo Flavio Capra’s 1525 work *Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne* (On the Excellence and Dignity of Women) was one of the first querelle writings in a vernacular, thus meant for and accessible to women. It was republished a short time later in Capra’s *Antropologia*, juxtaposed with a chapter on *The Dignity of Man*. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, also a defender of the dignity of man (*De homine*), wrote a treatise *Of the Nobilitie and excellency of woman kynde* in 1509. First published in Latin in 1529, it was soon translated into six European languages and reprinted many times, becoming a fundamental resource in the gender debate (English 1542). In 1595, a *Disputatio nova contra mulieres qua probatur eas homines non esse* (A new disputation against women, in which it is proved that they are not human beings) was first published in Germany, anonymously and in Latin. The work caused quite a furore since it answered the question, whether women are human, in the negative. It too appeared in several languages and was reprinted, copied and excerpted into the eighteenth century. The responses it provoked ranged from indignation to amusement to agreement.

In 1440 in France, Martin Le Franc had already written *Le Champion des Dames*, a lengthy defence of the female sex, and dedicated it to Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, a defender of women. It is the story of Franc Vouloir (Free Will) going to battle against the slanderous Malebouche (Vicious Tongue) in the *querelle des dames*. Later French writings included *Le débat de l’homme et de la femme* (1520), *Apologie du sexe féminin* (1522), *Controverses des sexes masculin et féminin* (1534) and, somewhat more belligerent, *La guerre des mâles contre les femelles* (The War of the Males against the Females, 1588). In Germany, Wilhelm Ignatius Schütz (*Ehren-Preiß Deß Hochlöblichen Frauen-Zimmers*, 1663)

wrote to the 'European woman' and Johannes Gorgias (*Gestürzter Ehren-Preis*, 1666), to the 'very praiseworthy European male sex'; Christiana Mariana von Ziegler wrote a satirical ode to 'the male sex, sung in the name of some women' (1639).

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, Jewish scholars and poets also joined the debate. Venetian rabbi Leon Modena translated *Fior di Virtù*, a popular Italian work, into Hebrew (*Tzemah tzadik*). While *Fior di Virtù* was a dialogue on female virtues and vices, Leon Modena selected only the misogynistic passages and omitted the philogynous ones. The debate was especially heated in Mantua. Abraham Sarteano composed fifty tercets called *The Misogynist*, and Jacob Fano wrote *Defender of Men*, wherein he asserted not only that men were created in God's image, but also that this physical image was further completed by circumcision. Fano also felt that Jewish men should follow Christian men's practice of avoiding the company of women. Elijah Ish Genazzano supported Abraham Sarteano. Both were challenged by the praise of women (*Shevah Ha-Nashim*) written by the pious and learned rabbi and cabbalist David Messer Leon. A Jewish woman named Sarah was so taken with the piece that she requested Messer Leon to write a larger work on the theme. He responded with a commentary to the final chapter of Proverbs, praising the deeds and virtues of women based on the Talmud, Midrashim, and ancient Roman and more recent Italian literature, such as Dante. Gedaliah ibn Yahya showed similar enthusiasm in the sixteenth century as a defender of women. He expounded the theory that women were more worthy than men, justifying his claim on the basis that Adam was created from dust, whereas Eve came from Adam's rib. Gedaliah also argued that women were just as rational as men, and had great strength, as demonstrated by the pains of childbirth they endured.<sup>2</sup>

Roughly a thousand such works were written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, even more including translations and reprints. There were thousands if we also take into account other works that took a stand in the querelle, such as the French *Bibliothèque bleue* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much earlier, in the thirteenth century, Jean de Meun had composed the *Roman de la rose* ('All of you are, were, or will be whores by action or intention'); Ernst Robert Curtius called it a manifesto of 'erotic communism' (1948). *The Romance of the Rose* was the most-read work of the French Middle Ages, a 'cult book of the intellectuals', whether aristocratic or bourgeois. Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* followed in the fourteenth century with 'The Wife of Bath'; Giovanni Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* (based on Plutarch's *Virtues of Women* and Petrarch's biographies of men); Boccaccio's *Decameron*, his misogynistic satire *Il Corbaccio*, which conjured up the old image of female insatiability and insatiable femininity, and his *Fates*

of *Illustrious Men* ('A sweet and deadly evil is the woman'). Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* appeared in the early sixteenth century, and in 1528 Baldesar Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* (The Book of the Courtier), the Renaissance book par excellence, whose influential dialogue form allowed the verbal duel to become the standard literary structure for such works. Castiglione called Boccaccio a misogynist outright and let his major characters, the Aristotelian Gasparo Pallavicino and the Platonist Giuliano de' Medici, argue with each other. Women, according to Gasparo, are an error of nature, useful at most for bearing children; that's why they are so flawed and are less virtuous than men, though admittedly (in deference to the women present), not through any fault of their own. Another character mentioned the possibility of teaching women 'some good qualities through force'. Gasparo responded that women themselves thought men were more worthy, since 'every woman would like to be a man'. Giuliano countered that they did not want to be men for the sake of being more perfect, but 'to have freedom' and to avoid male domination. Femininity – according to the Platonic element in the debate – was just as perfect as masculinity, irrespective of gender differences, which were 'nothing essential'. Women, so Platonists claimed, were just as capable of having virtue, reason, and even of governing states as men were. Gasparo, however, mobilized (male) form versus (female) matter and feared the worst: should 'the men be relegated to the kitchen and the spinning wheel'?

Some writings used the debate as a chance to declare its having been concluded, by attempting to define firm norms. *De institutione foeminae christianae* by Spanish arch-humanist Juan Luis Vives (1523) had been commissioned by the English queen Catherine of Aragon to teach her daughter Mary Tudor; it was soon translated into several European vernaculars (*Instruction of a Christian Woman*, 1540; in German, 1544). Further standards were set by Fray Luis de León of Spain (1583) in his *La perfecta casada* (The Perfect Housewife) and by Gervase Markham's *The English Housewife* (1615). Finally, there was the vast world of pictures, 'the layman's book' (*liber laicorum*) of high art and popular graphics, where the conflict of and about the sexes was one of the most popular subjects. Michelangelo's *David* was to be displayed in 1504 in Florence, two years after the Florentine electorate had voted Piero Soderini *Gonfaloniere*, or chief magistrate, for life. Politicians, artists and artisans debated on the proper location. The politicians were able to assert their choice of the highly symbolic site where it still stands today (now as a replica): in front of the Palazzo della Signoria. Their suggestion also served to unseat Donatello's sculpture *Judith and Holofernes*, which had been displayed at the site in 1495 by the supporters of the radical republic of Savonarola as a symbol of liberation from (Medici) tyranny. The moder-

ate republic removed *Judith*, since they considered her ‘a symbol of death’, and it ‘was not proper that the woman kill the man’.<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars today have considered this battle of the sexes merely a literary phenomenon without thematic significance, little more than an exercise for the display of scholastic or Platonic logic, irony and sarcasm, and parody and paradox. But of course satire and irony do not rule out a deeper meaning, and at the time, different people interpreted the words and images differently. The anonymous *Disputatio nova* on whether women are human emerged as a satire on the Polish Anabaptists, whose hair-splitting was seen to be as absurd as the claim that women were not human. The German version of 1618 still had a philogynous Jesuit arguing with a misogynistic Benedictine: ‘The word *homo* comes from *humus*, the stuff of which only man was made. Woman was merely formed from a rib of man. Because she was not originally created from *humus*, she could not be human.’ And to the notion ‘that women wish to consider themselves human’ because they give birth, ‘the answer already exists, namely, that beasts also give birth with pain, but that does not make them human. . . . In summary, no beast is so poisonous; women are much more poisonous, yes, more diabolical and evil than the devil himself’. But readers were not concerned with ironic or religious intentions, and the broad resonance of the work came solely from its position in the debate on the sexes. Incensed women tormented a man they thought had written the text and did not stop until he conceded that they were not human, but angels. The text was refuted in three Protestant reports the year it was published, including *Verteidigung des weiblichen Geschlechts* (Defence of the Female Sex), by Simon Gediccus, professor of Hebrew in Leipzig and a pastor in Halle. He argued ‘that in the kingdom of Christ it is truly no longer justified to make distinctions, neither those of nation, nor status, nor sex’.<sup>4</sup> Another defence of women appeared in the Netherlands in 1639, a year after the *Disputatio nova* had appeared in The Hague. The Catholic Church reacted as well. When the *Disputatio nova* of 1595 appeared in Italian in 1647 (*Che le donne non siano della specie degli uomini*), it was immediately placed on the Roman Catholic Index (though it took more than three hundred years before a papal letter was issued about *Mulieris dignitatem*, the dignity of woman, in 1988).

The ironic side of the debate came from the fact that female subordination was accepted as a matter of course and irrefutable, and – if it was doubted – as coming from the paradox of a topsy-turvy world. It was no coincidence that a number of woman-friendly voices presented themselves precisely as paradoxical; for example, Charles Etienne’s *Paradoxes, ce sont propos contre la commune opinion* (an imitation of Ortensio Landi’s *Paradossi* and reprinted seven times between 1553 and 1638)

praised women for their pre-eminence; or *Paradoxe apologétique* (1594) by Alexandre de Pontayméri. Furthermore, the paradox was derived from the double meaning of *homo* – human being or man, whereas man in the strict sense could be expressed by the Latin *vir*. (Since Cicero it had been believed that *virtus* was derived from *vir*, but this has meanwhile been refuted.) But in most European languages there was no third option (as in the German *Mensch* or the Dutch *mens*, which theoretically but not always in practice referred to both sexes), and even the Latin *homo* gradually lost its gender-encompassing meaning. Madame d'Épinay, *femme de lettres* and *salonnière* who corresponded with Catherine the Great and Frederick the Great, wrestled with the problem in 1776 – that is, in the Age of Enlightenment. She was referring not to grammar but to education when she wrote: ‘When I say man (*l'homme*), I mean all human creatures; when I say a man (*un homme*), I am designating only a human creature of the masculine gender (*genre masculin*), and when I say a woman (*une femme*), I am designating a human creature of the feminine gender (*genre féminin*).’<sup>5</sup> The question ‘Are women human?’ thus also meant: ‘Are women (like) men?’ The puzzle caused (and still causes) quite a lasting stir. The wide diffusion of the early modern dispute shows that it was an integral part of how the world was perceived at the time, its *imaginaire* (Jacques Le Goff). Opposition to traditional polemics against women became virtually a cultural code for opponents of scholasticism. In the sixteenth century, the *querelle des femmes* joined ranks with the *Querelle de l'amyé*, the dispute over friendship (Are women capable of friendship?), and in the seventeenth century with the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. Those who claimed that more recent literature and scholarship took precedence over the ancient works were generally in favour of changing the image, status and value of women. Around the same time, Molière’s satirical comedies ridiculed *Learned Ladies* (*Les Femmes savantes*, 1672) and the salons of the famous *précieuses* (in his *Les Précieuses ridicules*, 1659) and Lope de Vega conjured up the man-hating woman in *La vengadora de las mujeres* and *Diablos son las mujeres*.

Women participated in the debate from early on. Starting around the twelfth century, female theologians and mystics used biblical and spiritual language to express themselves and question the hierarchy of the sexes. Among them were Hildegard of Bingen, Elisabeth of Schönau, Beatrice of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marie d'Oignies, Marguerite Porète, the Italian Angela of Foligno, the Englishwoman Juliana of Norwich, and Margery Kempe. In her vision of the Trinity and the incarnation of God’s word, Hildegard saw ‘that motherly love of God’s embrace entered the world that nourished us to life’.<sup>6</sup> Around 1400, theological differences and suspicion of heresy (Marguerite Porète was burned in Paris in 1310) were replaced by a veritable controversy. It

broke out because male words were challenged for the first time by a woman, the early humanist Christine de Pizan. Born in Venice, Christine moved to Paris with her husband. She lived at the court of Charles V, and later as a widow she supported herself and her two children, often with difficulty, by transcribing and writing. For years she argued publicly with prominent French scholars about the image of women and men that the *Romance of the Rose* had created. Its author had taken up numerous misogynistic sayings – old and new, clerical and secular, scholarly and vernacular. ‘What are women?’ asked Christine. ‘Are they serpents, wolves, lions, dragons’ or ‘enemies of human nature, that are to be deceived and overcome?’ The first major literary debate in France was on the question of what constitutes women, as well as on the moral tasks of literary writing. This was also the first of many individual *querelles des femmes*. Christine ironically referred to her own voice as ‘a tiny cricket that flaps its little wings frantically all the livelong day, chirping loudly’. And she too expressed a paradox. Because of her unusual life and writing, she saw herself becoming a man (*devenir homme*). Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, supported her and characterized her as *insignis femina, virilis femina* (remarkable woman, virile woman). Her adversaries – also including other learned early humanists – branded the courage, acumen and wit of the cricket as unfeminine arrogance. It was said of ‘this woman who calls herself Christine and makes her writings public, . . . oh foolish presumption! . . . Beware, that you do not share the fate of the crow, who began to sing more loudly than usual when its song was praised and let fall the food it had in its beak’.<sup>7</sup>

Christine’s protest to the *Romance of the Rose* expressed numerous grievances of women: the ‘heartrending grievances’ of the ‘ladies and noble girls, distinguished women, citizens and virgins and women in general’, their complaints ‘about the brutal assaults, reprimands and slanders, and about infidelities, hurtful insults, lies and all sorts of other offenses’. The *Romance of the Rose*, clearly dissociating itself from the troubadour tradition, had proclaimed that women are fickle and gullible, deceptive and conniving, evil and insatiable, unfaithful and jealous. They had no conscience and stole money from men’s pockets. And love served only to satisfy male instincts, as shown by ‘nature’; one only had to look at ‘the cows and bulls, or the sheep and rams’. ‘My God, what a windbag’, sighed Christine in view of this licence for ‘indecentcy and vice’: it is by no means ‘folly, arrogance, or presumption’ if ‘as a woman I dare to reprimand such a sensitive author and contradict him, after he as a man has dared to defame and reprimand an entire sex without exception!’ She found de Meun’s rude vocabulary for male and female genitalia to be especially repulsive, as well as the postulate that ‘in the war of love it is better to betray than to be betrayed’. Christine was of the exact

opposite opinion. Moreover, the depraved comment of the author, that nature created 'all women for all men, and all men for all women' and that is why men unceasingly pester women, contradicted his own suggestion: 'Dear gentlemen, beware of the women, if you love your bodies and your souls. . . . Flee, flee, flee, flee, flee, children, such a creature . . . , for it destroys, poisons and contaminates every man who approaches her, . . . the evil, cold serpent.' The peak of Christine's controversy with the misogynistic tradition was her *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (*Book of the City of Ladies*, 1404–5). Here she reversed de Meun's admonishment: 'Remember, dear ladies, how these men call you frail, unserious, and easily influenced but yet try hard, using all kinds of strange and deceptive tricks, to catch you, just as one lays traps for wild animals. Flee, flee, my ladies', namely, from the sinful, boundless 'foolish love [the men] urge on you!' For in the end it is 'always to your detriment'.

Even back then, misogyny was downplayed by claims that it was art or convention. But complaints by women clearly show that more was at stake. Christine knew that apparent humour or unrealistic satire could very well serve to shape the relationship between the sexes. She knew of a husband who viewed the *Romance of the Rose* 'as a kind of gospel' and who referred to the work when beating his wife: 'You are just as the *Romance* says. . . . This wise master Jean de Meun knew all of women's tricks!' At the beginning of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine presents herself as a victim of such literature. Distraught, she asked herself why so many different men, learned ones among them, 'all concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice'. Her examination of her 'character and . . . conduct as a natural woman' and her conversations with other women convinced her that such judgements were groundless, but she could not fathom how so many famous men could spread such lies. She doubted herself, felt that all of the female sex were indeed 'monstrosities in nature' and she wrangled with God: 'Why did You not let me be born in the world as a male, so that . . . I would be as perfect as a male is said to be?' But she is given counsel: 'Come back to yourself, recover your senses, and do not trouble yourself anymore over such absurdities.' With the 'pick of your understanding' may she build a city that is a haven and protection for all women of all social strata. The allegorical *City of Ladies* presents an alternative to the misogynistic tradition and historiography, and creates a new world. Even male authors at this time occasionally indicated (usually in an ironic, ambivalent style) that history written by women – if they could write – would be different from history written by men. Chaucer, for instance, did so in *The Wife of Bath*; as did Johann Nider (through the voice of a nun) in his *Formicarius* (1437), although he otherwise attributed diabolical powers to women; and Luther ('if women wrote books, they would

write of men the same that men wrote of them'). Agostino Strozzi, on the other hand, took it very seriously around 1500: 'If women, like men, had been allowed to write about the past, how radiant and shining they would have been in the stories.' And a century earlier, Christine meant it just as seriously: 'If women had written the books we read, they would have handled things differently, for women know they have been falsely accused.'<sup>8</sup>

*The Book of the City of Ladies*, today a best-seller, raised questions that would continue to influence the gender debate for a long time. Christine claimed that the female soul is equivalent to the male soul. The female body, even though it was created weaker than the male, is still just as perfect. In accordance with a God-given division of labour, statesmanship was a task ascribed not to women but to men. But not only did men often fail to fulfil this obligation adequately (peace was a main subject in Christine's works, including a guide for a prince, and one for a princess, on how to rule ethically and effectively), women have a natural sense for government and had, in fact, often assumed such tasks successfully. They did not lack intelligence. If their knowledge is more limited than that of men, it is because 'they are not involved in many different things, but stay at home, where it is enough for them to run the household'. If it were 'customary to send daughters to school like sons, and if they were then taught the sciences, they would learn as thoroughly and understand the subtleties of all the arts and sciences as well as sons'. When men refuse to let their wives and daughters experience 'the sweet taste of knowledge acquired through study' because 'their mores would be ruined as a result', this merely proves that there are 'many foolish men' who are unhappy that women know more than they do. Irrespective of her love for her husband and her loneliness after his death ('I am alone, I want to remain alone, my tender friend left me all alone'), Christine saw a connection between solitude and intellectuality. She said to a woman, if your husband 'were still alive, you certainly would not have been able to devote yourself to your studies to the extent that you now do; keeping house would have prevented it'. Her standard self-reference, 'I, Christine', was an expression of her awareness of her dignity as a woman and individual.

Soon the number of women voicing their opinions in the querelle increased – mocking, outraged, angry – even if they would remain isolated for a long time and were known to varying degrees in their own time. Well known were the 'three stars in the Venetian sky'. Moderata Fonte, 'a virgin, well-educated in the sciences', presented a conversation among seven women in *Il merito delle donne* (The Merits of Women, 1600): 'A free heart lives in my breast; I serve no one, belong to no one but myself.'<sup>9</sup> Lucrezia Marinella wrote *Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne et I*

*diffetti, e mancamenti de gli huomini* (On the Nobility and Excellency of Women and the Deficiencies and Faults of Men, 1600) in response to a defamation of women composed by Giovanni Passi in 1599 (*I donneschi diffetti*) that was itself a reaction to earlier writings. The final work by Arcangela Tarabotti (*Che le donne siano della specie degli homini: Difesa delle donne*, 1651) was a polemical riposte to the Italian translation (1647) of the *Disputatio nova* on whether women are human. Although – or perhaps because – Tarabotti was a nun, she was not satisfied that the Church officially condemned the treatise. Here and in other writings she went above and beyond a mere response, conceiving a vision of female liberty.

In England a woman entered the debate for the first time in 1589 (under the pseudonym Jane Anger). In *Her Protection for Women*, the author inveighed against ‘the falsehood of men’, and man’s wish ‘to show his true vein in writing’ and thus especially ‘to write of us women’. She stressed that men could not survive at all if women did not do the housework. Anger challenged the assertion that ‘the man is the head of the woman’, claiming ‘some sovereignty in us women’. Polemics, pamphlets and pseudonyms characterized the English querelle in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In *The Women’s Sharp Revenge* (1640), Mary Tattlewell and Joan Hit-him-home addressed ‘the Male Gender’ that has so little compassion for ‘the Female Gender’. The authors complained that if women are weak by ‘Nature’, men strive to make them even weaker by ‘Nurture’, since women were not allowed to learn anything but ‘to please and content [men’s] licentious appetites’. The Benedictine Benito Feijóo, father of the Spanish Enlightenment, published a *Defence of Women* in 1739 (it was translated into English in 1778). Also in 1739, a learned woman in England writing anonymously under the pseudonym Sophia presented her arguments in *Woman Not Inferior to Man*, a pamphlet that provoked others in response. Sophia asserted that there is no ‘essential’ sexual difference that could grant legitimacy to men’s superiority over women (the physical difference would tend more to legitimate the opposite). She perceived ‘no other difference than what their tyranny has created’. There was ‘perfect equality’ between the sexes, even if that seemed ‘as great a paradox’ as, until recently, the notion that people on the other side of the globe stood on their heads. Only lack of education, which had to be rectified, put women in their present inferior position. In 1762, Madame de Beaumer opposed unnamed male critics, writing in the *Journal des Dames* that ‘I love this sex and am jealous to uphold its honour and its rights’.<sup>10</sup> It was a time when significant women had become active in public (though they were excluded from the academies of the Enlightenment): the *salonnières* in France, the circle of the Bluestockings in England, and some painters who gained international fame, such

as Angelika Kauffmann of Switzerland, who lived in England and Italy, and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in France.

The authors involved in the querelle dealt not with women alone but with men as well (whereas much more numerous works of the time dealt exclusively with men). The words and images spanned a wide range of subject areas: marriage and adultery, sex and chastity, beauty and shame, virtue and vice, work and children, money and violence (within and outside marriage), intellect and domination (within and outside marriage), heaven and hell (usually their worldly variants), and God and the world. In the context of the witch hunts, there were also controversies from the very beginning whether or not witches existed, where they got their powers from, and who should be regarded as a witch. Though female writers were a minority in the *querelle des femmes*, women comprised a majority of the victims of the witch debate. The debate came to a deadly conclusion for around 100,000 people, more than two-thirds of whom were women (there were also many women among the accusers). Even at the time, there was discussion as to why ‘so many more women become bewitched than do men’. In 1576 in Germany, there were frequent references to women’s gullibility and curiosity – Eve’s legacy – and to women’s vindictiveness and greed. In England, too, Eve and the characterization of women as ‘a tool of the devil’ were conjured up in 1627. It was argued that women’s inclination to gossip led to exposure of their witchcraft more easily than in the case of men, and that women were more domineering than men and therefore more likely to become witches.<sup>11</sup>

In general, the Bible, especially Genesis, played an important role in the debate: did God create ‘man in his own image’ and ‘as male and female’ in a single act of creation (Gen. 1:27)? Or was woman – referred to as *virago* in the Vulgate, parallel to *vir*, which gave rise to the term ‘she-man’ – taken from man (Gen. 2:20–3)? And if so, was that a symbol of her inferiority or rather of her superiority, since she was made out of a more noble material than was man, who was formed from the dust of the earth? And what is the meaning of ‘they shall be one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24)? And which one of them bore more or less blame for the Fall and original sin? It was not only in Luther’s eyes that Genesis was written ‘for us’. It was also a battleground of the querelle, especially since many men and women could not read the Bible until its translations into the vernacular circulated in the sixteenth century. In 1536 Jean Bouchet even argued that ‘la querelle de l’homme contre la femme’ had begun with Adam and Eve themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, it was not always so easy to determine what a man was, as Parsifal’s mother once thought (Eschenbach’s *Parzival* was first printed in 1477). ‘With other women’, she watched the baby eagerly and when

she ‘joyfully realized that it was male, she gave it the caressing it was due’. A man could also be recognized by way of his trousers, and the trousers became a symbolic site of the battle of the sexes (in the traditional and richly illustrated ‘fight for the breeches’); the scholar Joseph Glanvill maintained in 1661 that truth had no chance if ‘the *Affections* wear the breeches and the *Female* rules’. Furthermore, the beard was a symbol of male superiority (as seen in early Christian writings). In his *École des femmes* (*School for Wives*, 1662), Molière had Arnolphe say: ‘Du côté de la barbe est la toute-puissance.’ A rebellious or masculinized woman was occasionally called *mulier barbata*, a bearded woman. Marie de Gournay argued in her treatise *Egalité des hommes et des femmes* (1622) that women resemble men as a female cat resembles a tomcat; that women could be priestesses; that Christ came into the world as a man only because in view of misogynistic Jewish tradition he would never have achieved anything as a woman; and that women are denied having been created in the image of God because God – unjustly – is thought to have a beard. In 1792, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, a supporter of women, published *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* (*On the Civic Improvement of Women*). He criticized the view that male American Indians were unmasculine because they did not have beards, and that for the same reason women were not created in the image of God. Thus the former were considered ‘a much lower class of human beings’, and the latter – ‘O the beardless conclusion!’ – were considered to have an inferior mind.<sup>13</sup> The image of man, as characterized in querelle literature, was indeed often less flattering than the depiction in Pico della Mirandola’s *De dignitate hominis*. It was an image that women (as well as some men) did not always want to resemble. Although the voices in support of women always insisted that both sexes had the same capacity for reason and virtue, the debate was not about equality in the sense of sameness, but the relative superiority or inferiority of the sexes in everyday life.

The question whether or not women are human caused a stir, especially after the publication of the *Disputatio nova* in 1595. But the issue had been brewing even earlier. Christine de Pizan saw reason to argue ‘that women belong to the . . . human race as much as men’ and are by no means ‘another species or dissimilar race’. Erasmus of Rotterdam was one of the few male dialogue authors who allowed women to speak themselves. In his *Senatulus sive conciliabulum muliercularum*, a circle of women complained that men ‘use us only for their pleasure and barely deem us worthy of the name *human*’. The influential French legal scholar Jacques Cuias denied women’s humanity in 1587, as did the German jurist Scipio Gentilis a year later. Some regarded the entire issue as a joke; others took it seriously, and in the major encyclopedias – from

Pierre Bayle (1697) to the German Zedler (1747) – the question was debated in earnest. Pietistic librarian and court poet Georg Christian Lehms wrote in 1715 in *Teutschlands Galante Poetinnen* that the judgement that ‘womenfolk are not human’ contradicted ‘both divine and secular rights, and all honourable souls of honoured men who respect this noble sex’. The question remained controversial, since depending on how ‘man’ was defined – through soul or reason, bodily strength or virtue, freedom or dominion – its meaning also changed. Zedler’s *Grosses vollständiges Universallexikon* found the opinion that ‘women are not human’ simply ‘foolish’. But by no means did the Zedler encyclopedia find some concrete aspects of the question foolish. ‘Do women become blessed through childbirth?’ was answered somewhat reluctantly in the affirmative. ‘Are women capable of acquiring academic honorary degrees?’ (‘Why not?’); ‘Should women be allowed to teach in public?’ (no); and a ‘women’s regiment’ was out of the question, since ‘leaving the breeches’ to the women in the house meant to attack the divine order. It was thus not surprising that Mary Wollstonecraft argued in 1790 and 1792 against the assumption that ‘one half of the human species, at least, have no souls’ and that females counted ‘rather as women than human creatures’. At the same time, Hippel also wondered, ‘Humanity? Are not women human beings as well? . . . Why should women not be considered as persons?’ And in 1833, the Swiss Jakob Leuthy, in *Das Recht der Weiber* (The Rights of Women), asked ‘Have human beings the right to be free? Are woman not human?’<sup>14</sup> Three decades later John Stuart Mill urged the House of Commons to replace the word *man* with *person* in the new suffrage law in order to include women, but the motion was rejected.

### Misogamy and Misogyny; Philogamy and Philogyny

Every hour we judge things differently, and we should not be ashamed of correcting our errors. Change is natural, for men as well as women. . . .  
And so all things change: men, women, and the times.

João de Barros, 1540<sup>15</sup>

The debate on marriage, celibacy, sexuality and the Bible quotation ‘It is not good that the man should be alone’ (Gen. 2:18) was known as the *querelle du mariage*. It became an integral aspect of the gender debate. Christine de Pizan was also familiar with this subject and viewed it from various perspectives. Her adversaries accused her of being anti-love, but she countered their reproach by asserting that ‘perfect love’ does not necessarily imply sexuality and certainly not promiscuity. She responded

harshly to Jean de Meun's claim that women enjoy being raped. She attacked the traditional male view that marriage is so unbearable because women are unbearable and the source of all evil. She offered a critique of marriage from a woman's perspective, at the same time praising marriage. On the one hand, 'there are many women greatly mistreated by their husbands', and because of their husbands' harshness they lead weary lives, they suffer more 'than if they were slaves among the Saracens' and in fact 'men are masters over their wives, and not the wives mistresses over their husbands'. Before marrying, it is less important 'to warn men about women's ruses' than to warn women 'against men's traps'. On the other hand, Christine also presented numerous arguments and evidence in favour of marriage that proved that women are not as bad as men assume. She also stressed that not all women are good, just as not all men are bad; that 'not all marriages are conducted with such spite'; and that God should be thanked for 'giving them so much happiness'. In the case of conflicts, she comforted the wives, 'Don't be sad that you are so greatly subjugated by your husbands . . . since often the state of liberty is not advantageous', and advised them to be patient with their 'difficult' husbands. Christine's praise of marriage was a means to praise women, and her critique of marriage was a means to criticize men.

In Christine's time, marriage had gone through considerable changes. In works that attempted to do justice to the different situations of women, they were not only generally treated on the basis of three categories – the triad of virgins, widows and wives – but their actual status was defined primarily by their position within the family and the larger kinship. In many places during the eleventh and twelfth centuries marriage was considered an alliance and peace treaty between families (often enemies), particularly among the dynasties, aristocratic circles and the cities, whereas virtually nothing is known about the rest of the population. The bride was a pledge and an instrument for a harmonious union. Family alliances were based on the exchange of women. Only gradually was emphasis placed on the married couple and the 'good wife'. Three main factors were significant in this regard.

First, starting in the late eleventh century the Church was increasingly successful in insisting that both spouses entered matrimony of their own free will. The bride's freedom to say 'I do' (or to say no) was especially explosive with respect to the family's interests. Free choice of spouse gained acceptance at least in theory and by the Church, though not in practice (silence on the part of the woman was usually regarded as consent). In the same period, marriage assumed a sacramental character, and thus became fundamentally indissoluble. Women throughout Europe around 1200 were likely to marry very young (nobility and urban patriciate at around thirteen years of age; in rural areas around

seventeen), and their husbands were usually considerably older. Power relations were therefore based not only on gender but on age. After the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, when Europe lost approximately one-third of its population, the female marriage age rose and the 'western European marriage pattern' developed – a relatively high marriage age for women (the poorer and more rural the woman, the later she married) and a large number of women who never married. Leon Battista Alberti insisted in his treatise *I libri della famiglia* (1432–41) that women should marry young 'so they do not fall prey to vices while waiting for what is demanded by nature'.<sup>16</sup> Married women spent most of their adult life dealing with pregnancy and childbirth (an average of ten children in Florence, nine for the French peasantry); barely two of the offspring survived their parents in Florence of the late Middle Ages. About one in seven mothers (of all social strata) died in or as a result of childbirth, and many more suffered permanent damage to their health. Most nursed their children themselves, but well-to-do women often sought the services of a wet-nurse (roughly one in four of these babies died). Among a wife's obligations (before and after the great changes in marriage) were fertility, fidelity in marriage, domesticity and responsibility for the chastity of the daughters. The main duty of the husband was to support the wife, but within the family he was also the master and had the right to use corporal punishment. (This does not mean that women did not also scold and occasionally hit their husbands.)

Second, marriage meant a crucial transfer of money and property. Many – perhaps most – women, from those of royal rank in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to the middle class of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, married below the status or property of their birth family (this is sometimes used to explain the theme of the bitter and thus quarrelsome wife, which abounded in the gender querelle). In the early Middle Ages it was common for families to exchange gifts: the husband (or his family) gave a gift to his bride (or her family) after the wedding day and, in the other direction, the bride's family paid a dowry. From the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, the husband's gift gradually fell out of practice (later in northern than in southern Europe). Complaints by women as a result are hardly surprising, since this meant a lessening of her value, even an expropriation. The dowry became the crucial transfer of the marital exchange; its value was subjected to centuries of inflation (efforts to slow down the increase were as numerous as they were unsuccessful), and it became more and more expensive for fathers to marry off their daughters. Dante Alighieri mourned the good old days 'when a daughter's coming of age did not frighten her father'. Almost everywhere women lost their rights to administer their own dowry, which had originally served as a substitute for the paternal inheritance. They retained – even as

widows – at most usufructuary rights. Girls whose fathers could afford only a small dowry, or none at all, did wage labour to save enough for one (usually in the textile industry, such as sewing or spinning, or in girls' institutions during the Renaissance by embroidering precious robes and tapestries). Other than that, a poor woman's 'sole capital is her chastity',<sup>17</sup> according to one Italian author in 1674 in retrospect. Sometimes a pious foundation paid the dowry for her to get married.

Third, it became increasingly important for women to marry. Those living outside a family setting suffered a life of bitter impoverishment, and even resorted to begging. Most importantly, a new pattern in the relationship between work and family life had developed in the twelfth century. In the cities and in those rural regions where people worked in bondage, options for marriage increased and the married couple became a working couple. Liberation from bondage was not possible individually, but only as a couple that worked for the market. Women retained responsibility for the housework, but only married couples – together with the other family members – could assure their subsistence.<sup>18</sup> In the late Middle Ages and early modern times, this laid the foundation for the modern family as the 'nucleus of the new organization of the economy'.

It is not surprising that in this period of radical change in many other areas as well, marriage became a pressing social, political and moral issue. The *querelle du mariage* took place at the interface between tradition (ancient as well as Christian) and innovation (humanism as well as religious reform). One reason why many humanists felt the dignity of man excluded the dignity of woman was because they rejected marriage. Humanist opponents of marriage answered the old male question *An uxor sit ducenda* (Should a man marry?) with an attack against women and by reverting to the ancients (Juvenal had advised a bridegroom, 'Are you mad? Or hunted by the Furies? Taking a wife! Would you not rather take a rope and hang yourself?'). The *suasio* or *dissuasio nubendi* was a popular theme. Hatred of marriage, or misogamy, became a vehicle for expressing misogyny, and vice versa. The earnest Petrarch complained about marriage in a letter, as did the mocking Boccaccio in the *Decameron* and the satirical *Il Corbaccio*. In his biography of Dante, Boccaccio criticized the poet, saying that Dante's creativity suffered as a result of his marriage. The celibate Pico della Mirandola, who 'fled both marriage and worldly service', was less severe. In response to the question which of the two burdens – solitariness or coupledness – is easier, Pico preferred marriage 'with a slight smile'. Marriage was for him 'less servitude and not as dangerous. For he loved freedom above all else', as Thomas More reported in his biography of Pico.<sup>19</sup> Pico's learned friend Ermolao Barbaro was less willing to compromise in *De coelibatu* (around 1472), claiming that nothing was so harmful to scholarship as matrimonial 'chains', the

*iugum uxoris et cura puerorum*, the marital yoke, caring for children and listening to their crying. In Rabelais's *Third Book* (*Tiers Livre*, 1546) the question *Me dois-je marier?* (Should I marry?) was examined from all conceivable angles – Panurge fears that a wife would cuckold him – and Bernardo Trotto harshly condemned marriage in *Dialoghi del matrimonio e vita vedovile* (1578), calling it 'a waste of time, money and the brain'. Ercole Tasso, a married scholar, composed a treatise against wives, which provoked an apologia for marriage and wives by Torquato Tasso, a confirmed (and homosexual) bachelor. Giovanni della Casa, cleric and author of a classical Renaissance essay on male virtues and social etiquette (*Galateo*), wrote *An uxor sit ducenda* (1537). In it, he asserted that the survival of mankind is not threatened by celibacy. As we have seen from the animal kingdom and times before 'legitimate marriage' existed, he expounded, procreation is amply secured through naturally occurring promiscuity. Uneducated rather than noble or aristocratic men should take responsibility for reproduction. Woman is closer to animals than to man; her body and character make marriage unbearable, and since she is hardly seen prior to the wedding, it is like buying a pig in a poke. Della Casa continued that almost all women are ugly; and even if a woman did happen to be attractive, one would tire of her in six months and 'only the appeal of a new one would help ease the boredom'. After having borne children, 'you would not want to look at her anymore; her breasts hang, her limbs feel limp and flabby'. She menstruates and is perpetually ill, gluttonous and foul-smelling. Once she gets old she is toothless and 'her entire body is alarmingly ugly'. Women are weak, his diatribe went on, lazy, incapable of holding public office and 'not useful even in war', since their office is 'one for peace and quiet'. They are only suited for one 'certain duty', but that is hardly gratifying with one's own wife.<sup>20</sup>

Not only the humanists but clerics as well made a smooth transition from misogyny to misogamy and vice versa. They based their thoughts not on classical but on Christian tradition, and enjoyed turning around the female virtues of the Old Testament (Prov. 31:10–29). These include the *Alphabet* written around 1400 by the Archbishop of Florence, which was printed in the sixteenth century and later published in Latin, Spanish, French, English and Dutch, and the *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes* (1617) by the Franciscan Alexis Troussel, which in turn provoked a whole series of counter-alphabets and treatises in defence of women. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, misogynistic and misogynous satires such as *Le Miroir du Mariage* and *Les quinze joyes de mariage*, which complained of the loss of freedom that men suffered in marriage, became widespread in France. Jurists also got involved in the debate. André Tiraqueau's *De legibus connubialibus*

(1513) was reprinted and expanded many times. It was an encyclopedia of quotes and commonplace adages that aimed to prove the inferiority of women within and outside marriage.

Misogyny and misogamy were, aside from satire, a serious matter and they were earnestly criticized, especially by two groups of men, the civic humanists and religious reformers. Both these groups sought to upgrade marriage and therefore, even though it was not their primary thrust, they tended to revise the tradition of misogyny. The civic humanists charged their leisure-loving colleagues with lacking a sense of *res publica* and its social foundations. Leonardo Bruni, Florentine chancellor, censured Boccaccio for his criticism of Dante's marriage. He referred to the many great philosophers who were married ('What great philosopher was married?' was a question still being posed by Nietzsche), and railed against the ignorance of those 'who hide themselves in solitude and idleness' and 'do not even know three letters', for 'Man is an *animal civile*', and 'the primary union, from whose multiplication a society emerges, is that between man and woman, and without it there is no perfection'. Giannozzo Manetti praised Socrates not only as a philosopher and citizen but as a father; and he vindicated not only man but woman as well. In *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man* (*De dignitate et excellentia hominis*, 1452), Manetti rejected the teachings of human *miseria* and its presumed root, having been born of a woman. He criticized Pope Innocent III who, because he did not know Hebrew, had wrongly concluded from Genesis that women, the body and love are inferior dimensions of life. In 1472 in Germany, Albrecht von Eyb asked whether or not a man should take a wife (*Ob einem manne sey zu nemen ein eelichs wib oder nit*). He discussed the pros and cons of marriage for a man and in the end answered affirmatively. Even the Platonic ascetic Marsilio Ficino attacked the Abelard complex. Since man was created in God's image, Ficino believed man should also propagate this gift. Also, for a man, marriage is a 'domestic *res publica*', and he must direct 'all prudence and virtue to rule over it'. 'By governing the family with great care, you form yourselves, gather experience and honour in the earthly kingdom, and make yourselves worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven.' Such humanists saw the true problem with marriage as lying not in the general badness of women but in making the correct – and difficult – choice of a spouse. Francesco Barbaro, grandfather of the misogynist Ermolao, dedicated his treatise in praise of marriage to this subject (*De re uxoria, On Wifely Duties*, 1415–16). Around the mid-sixteenth century, another Venetian patrician impressed upon the prospective father 'to choose with utmost care the terrain upon which he thinks to spread his seed'.<sup>21</sup>

The second criticism of misogynous and misogynistic tradition evolved from the desire for religious reform. Christian celibacy had long since

ceased to mean sexual abstinence. 'Many are celibate, but few are chaste', bemoaned Erasmus of Rotterdam. Secular clerics were living in concubinage; popes had mistresses and children. In Venice alone there were approximately thirty convents involved in court cases on sexual relations in the fifteenth century, and pregnant nuns were not unusual. Erasmus was especially critical of religious vows, albeit more so for monks than for nuns. In his dialogue on the misogynous virgin (*Virgo misogynos*, 1523), he claimed that many nuns 'follow Sappho's example', although that was not their genuine inclination. In the end the virgin was compelled by love to decide to marry. Here and in other writings Erasmus expressed a new marriage ideal. In contrast to others, he discussed it not only from the man's perspective but from a woman's as well. On the one hand, more and more voices admonished a return to the virginal ideal for clergy and nuns; on the other hand, an increasing number made reference to Paul (1 Cor. 7:9, 'it is better to marry than to burn') in demanding that sexual relations be legitimized and the ban on marriage eliminated for secular priests.

From 1519 to 1523, Martin Luther denounced the priestly celibacy with increasing stridency as the work of the devil. He was far from alone in doing so, and was not even a spokesman. Years earlier, Reformation clerics had already dared to take the sensational step of marrying in public. They thus risked being charged with concubinage, and they attacked celibacy as an 'abominable murder of the soul'. Luther went beyond the common criticism of priestly vows of celibacy, inveighing against monasteries 'as morasses and warehouses of the devil'. He condemned the doctrine of the monastic 'state of perfection', thereby rejecting a lifestyle that had been recognized for well over a millennium. After the marriage epidemic had struck, Luther also became active with respect to nuns. He organized the liberation of nine nuns who had come to him for advice, freeing them 'from the prison of human tyranny' and justifying his intervention in his treatise *Ursache und Antwort, daß Jungfrauen Klöster göttlich verlassen dürfen* (1523, Reason and answer to the question whether virgins are allowed by God to leave the convent). A woman, he argued, 'is not created to be a virgin, but to bear children', as 'proven by the fact that God created her body to serve this purpose'.<sup>22</sup> In 1525, at the age of forty-two, Luther married one of the freed nuns, Katharina von Bora.

The controversies over priests marrying and virginity were a focus of Protestant as well as Catholic reform, for both men and women. The issues were not resolved once and for all until the final session of the Council of Trent in 1563. Their repercussions for the general population were greater than that of Luther's Ninety-five Theses and they brought widespread support for the Reformation. The image of the Reformation,

especially in its scandalous early phase, was marked by the public marriages of priests, monks and nuns; the suppression of monasteries; and an epidemic of marriages in Germany – the destination of French reformers in haste to get married. An essential element of the European *querelle des femmes* was not only the secular *querelle du mariage* but its religious counterpart as well. Luther railed against the popular misogamy and intervened in the dispute with his *Vom ehelichen Leben* (*On Married Life*, 1522). It is ‘a hue and cry of writing about women and matrimony’, he declared, that ‘has such a generally deplorable reputation. There are many heathen books that describe nothing but the vices of women and the offensiveness of matrimony’, and even Christians claimed (recalling Tertullian) ‘that a woman is a necessary evil and there is no house that does without such evil’. For Luther the conflict was not literature but life: ‘This is why the young men should be wary if they read the heathen books and hear the general complaint, making sure they do not draw up poison. For the devil is not happy with married life, since it is God’s work and goodwill. That is why he let there be so much called out and written against it in the world’, such as ‘fleeting joy and lasting woe’. In view of the daily routines of matrimony, ‘natural reason, a clever whore’, might turn up the ‘nose and say, “Oh, should I rock the child, wash the nappies, make the beds, smell the stench, watch the night, care for it when it cries, heal its rash and sore, and then care for the woman, feed her, work” . . . and what more does matrimony teach of dispassion and toil’. Faith, however, according to Luther, argued that the burdens of matrimony are nothing but ‘external dispassion and toil’, while the important thing is the ‘spiritual, inner desire’, ‘that man and wife love each other, are one, and care for each other’. Faith even seemed to suggest a change in roles. ‘If a man went and washed the nappies and did otherwise despicable chores for the child’, all might jest, but ‘God laughs and is pleased with all the angels and creatures, not that he washes nappies, but that he does it out of faith’. Yet Luther merely used the ironic *querelle* paradox of the topsy-turvy world to underline his teachings that faith is more important than deed. He too considered sexuality within marriage to be sinful, but a sin no greater than other sins. Other than that (regarding the man), it was a matter of nature and ‘natural fluids’: ‘To say it crudely but honestly, if it doesn’t go into a woman, it goes into your shirt.’<sup>23</sup>

Although the subject of the heated debates was indeed religion, Protestant philogamy was also perceived as a question of gender and sexuality. In France as well as Germany, Catholics turned around the Protestant attacks on clerical fornication and accused the Protestants of propagating marriage for the sake of carnal lust and of taking the side of women. Calvin saw cause to reject the presumption: ‘The papists want the world

to believe that all the discord and debate between us and them is a kind of Trojan War that we are waging *for the women*.' German Reformers, on the other hand, emphasized that they did not marry because of sensual desire; instead, they bore the 'Cross of Christ' out of brotherly love as a duty and sacrifice, in order to fight the 'false, diabolical chastity'.<sup>24</sup>

Irrespective of their theological and political differences, however, Protestants and Catholics were soon reunited in their ideas on the status of married women. First of all, the enhanced status and reform of marriage that the Protestants introduced, which also served to promote a new image of women, was not nearly as new as it seemed to many contemporaries. In fact, it advanced previous Church and secular movements towards reform that were now also taken up again by the Catholic Church. Second, Catholic reform adopted essential initiatives of the Protestant marriage ideal. In both camps, marriage had a threefold meaning – procreation, avoidance of extramarital sin and mutual companionship. Differences often existed only in the respective prioritization. Catholics such as Juan Luis Vives, as well as Reformers such as Calvin, stressed companionship over procreation. Protestants and Catholics alike produced countless treatises, sermons and homily readings from the pulpit praising marriage as a God-given lifestyle and the foundation of both the spiritual and worldly orders. Among the best known was the work on Christian matrimony by Heinrich Bullinger, successor to Zwingli, which appeared in 1540 in Switzerland but was especially popular in England, describing the 'marital yoke'; Thomas Becon's *The Book of Matrimony* (1562) and the homily on matrimony which was read at weddings in Tudor England ('True it is, that [women] must specially feel the griefs and pains of their matrimony, in that they relinquish the liberty of their own rule, in the pain of their travailing, in the bringing up of their own children, in which offices they be in great perils, and be grieved with many afflictions, which they might be without if they lived out of matrimony'); Johann Freder's *Dialogus dem Ehestand zu ehren* (Dialogue in Honour of Matrimony), which appeared in 1545 with a foreword by Luther and which refuted misogynistic and anti-matrimonial sayings in the form of a debate; the *Philosophisch Ehzuchtbüchlein* (Philosophical Treatise on Conjugal Discipline) by Johann Fischart of Strasbourg; and Catholic authors such as Vives, Erasmus and preachers such as the Portuguese João de Barros. Catholics no longer promoted celibacy by strenuously insisting that women were fundamentally bad; instead, they used other means. Third, there was confusion among both Protestants and Catholics regarding the relationship between faith and deed with respect to the sexual obligations of wives. It was not only Catholics, such as Vives, who maintained that a wife's sexual deed for her husband was a deed for God. Protestants, too, believed that in bed she should 'rather be Catholic than Lutheran, keeping more to the

deed than to faith'.<sup>25</sup> Fourth, Reformers viewed marriage as a secular arrangement, whereas for Catholics it was a sacrament. In practice, however, it was virtually indissoluble, not only for Catholics but for Protestants as well. Fifth, Protestantism changed considerably after its rebellious beginnings. Behind the new disciplinary order in Protestant cities and the elimination of the 'women's houses', the houses for urban prostitutes, stood the old picture of the sexually insatiable and domineering woman. In the end the Reformation, which at first had propagated the same sexual ethics for both sexes and the dignity of the married woman, suspected all women, single or married, of being ever ready to surrender themselves to their lust for debauchery.

Despite many similarities across confessional lines, there was a dramatic difference between Protestant and Catholic regions in Europe, and it constituted the only genuine and institutional innovation of Protestantism: the elimination of celibacy and the introduction of marriage for pastors. The debates that took place on the issue revealed deep fears regarding masculinity and femininity and a search for a new identity for men and women. For women, the change had several consequences. First, it meant losing the chance to live with women and not under direct male custody. Some convents were dissolved peaceably, others by force, and many nuns put up powerful resistance. Caritas Pirckheimer argued cleverly with the new doctrine of *sola fide*: 'We know that the convent cannot make us blessed, but it also cannot make us wretched.' Whoever thinks 'that that could make her blessed is just as wrong as someone who thinks that merely leaving the convent is enough to make one blessed; there is more to it than that'. Even though Luther took sides against the peasants in the Peasants' War, he and peasant women were agreed on one thing that concerned not faith but a woman's task. A crowd of angry peasant women stormed a nunnery, complaining about their hard work and the good life in the convent and demanding that the nuns also be part of the 'ordinary masses' and 'have to have children and suffer the same pains as they did'. Pastor Erasmus Alber was happy that 'there were so many thousands of married women who used to be (if you please) vain whores'; and married life is 'a magnificent state'. In Protestantism, the new-old marriage ideal became binding for all women. In 1522 Luther had still emphasized that it was legitimate for women, truly and of their own free will, to feel a calling to virginity and 'cloistering', though 'of a thousand, certainly hardly one' would be found. And one should not 'make a commandment out of a liberty'.<sup>26</sup> But it was not long before the new conjugal freedom became a conjugal duty.

Second, the Reformation created a new figure – the pastor's wife. She became the new model for man's 'companion' or 'helpmeet' (Gen. 2:18), an exemplary house mother and exceptional church mother. Katharina

Zell, who had married in 1523 (her two children died young), took this companionship very seriously. In a pamphlet (*Defence of her husband, who is a pastor and servant in the word of God in Strasbourg*), she publicly justified the spectacular marriage of her Reformer husband Matthew, and in doing so she made reference to a paradox that was often used in the *querelle des femmes*: ‘God has chosen that which is weak in the world to ruin that which is strong.’ She offered her home as a refuge to hunted Lutherans, took care of them, even gave a public speech after the death of her husband, and argued that marriage was a means of saving souls – one’s own as well as others’. Third, there were many concubines who were abandoned by their priestly friend if he ultimately chose Catholicism and once again took his vows seriously. Many of them suffered and complained, especially if they had children by him. Fourth, there were many nuns for whom the convent had truly been a prison and who were glad to be able to leave and seek a husband. Fifth, especially among women who were not nuns, there were many who highly respected the new dignity of matrimony, wife and companionship. Among them was Marguerite d’Angoulême, sister of Francis I of France and queen of Navarre. In her *Heptameron*, a kind of *comédie humaine* which circulated from 1549, the year of her death, she allowed women and men to argue about love, marriage and sexuality, coming to the conclusion that men and women were equal with regard to both vice and virtue. She argued that priests should marry rather than living a false, chaste life, and that celibacy was made for man, but man was not made for celibacy. But she never went so far – especially with an eye to women – as to value marriage higher than an unmarried life.

But what exactly was the relationship – for Protestants as well as Catholics – between companionship and domination, obedience and autonomy, freedom and domesticity, or among superiority, inferiority and equality? This was a controversial issue, especially in actual married life, and would remain so for centuries. In Protestant historiography as well as in the secularized world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept of ‘companionship’ gave way to that of ‘complementarity’. In any case, raising the status of the wife contributed to the formation of the married couple as a working couple. And new tasks became legitimate for wives and mothers, especially the early education (including religious education) of sons and daughters. For Protestant women there was no longer a cult of the Virgin Mary or the saints, which had been so important for Catholics since the twelfth century. And for all women the old legal rule from the Justinian *Corpus Iuris Civilis* still held, that the dignity of women was less than that of men (*major dignitas est in sexu virili*). In English common law it assumed the form of coverture for married women, according to which man and woman were *one* person – as in Genesis *one*

flesh – and the person of the flesh was the man. In serious conflicts it was not vague values that mattered, after all, but rigid law.

Raising the status of women by raising the status of marriage was a balancing act filled with tension. Help was found once again in the Book of Genesis. Since Eve did not come from Adam's head, she was not superior to him. Since she did not come from his foot, she was not inferior to him. The rib implied equality. Luther wrestled with the problem of overcoming the old polarity of inferiority versus superiority by constructing a new one. Eve was not solely responsible for the Fall and she was also not a deficient man. According to Luther, the fact that Genesis spoke of two sexes demonstrates, on the one hand, that both are equally capable of salvation; on the other hand, it also shows that woman not only has a different body from that of man, but also a weaker spirit (*ingenium longe infirmius*). Although both Eve and Adam were created as *praestantissima creatura* (pre-eminent creations) and resemble each other with respect to *iusticia, sapientia, et salus* (justice, wisdom and salvation), Eve remains nevertheless a woman (*tamen fuit mulier*) and thus inferior (*inferior masculino sexu*). Luther illustrated the difficult relationship using the image of the sun and the moon: 'As the sun is more splendid than the moon' – hastily underscoring the tension: 'although the moon is also a most splendid body' – woman is inferior to man in dignity (*tamen non aequabat gloriam et dignitatem masculi*). As companions they shine together among the stars (the household, children and livestock), *et tamen magna differentia est sexus*. Sun and moon were perfectly suited to continue the *querelle des femmes*, which was supposed to come to an end. In contrast to Luther, Johann Fischart, a Strasbourg Protestant, did not see any contradiction in woman being man's companion and man nevertheless being the head of woman: just 'as the sun does not destroy the light of the moon, . . . a just man should do his woman honour', since the two cannot exist without 'such community'. François Rabelais, humanist, physician and cleric, had let the physician Rondibilis in the *Third Book* explain that woman resembles the moon in that she appears in her best light when the husband-sun is absent, especially at night. Rabelais's theologian Hippothadeus thought that the light of female virtue was at most a reflection of her husband's light. According to another French author, she resembled the moon to the extent that 'all dignity of the woman comes solely from her husband'. In contrast to the moon, however, she should never be seen in the absence of her sun, 'she must live in stillness and watch over the house'.<sup>27</sup> Such an image was not new. Even Plutarch had used it, and in the early Christian period the moon was merely a reflector in contrast to having a true existence.

Does that mean there was nothing new under the sun? Most doctrines on matrimony were now agreed that physical violence by the husband

was only legitimate if the wife ‘truly’ deserved it. Open ‘tyranny’ was – at least in theory – no longer acceptable. Misogyny still existed, especially in Luther’s blunt language, but even husbands were seriously reprimanded by pastors. Like theology, actual married life also remained a balancing act that required constant renegotiating, and a querelle. ‘Women love to rule and dominate by nature’, Luther asserted, and Cyriacus Spangenberg complained that only very few ‘are obedient and subservient to their husbands. They do not let themselves be governed; instead, they always want to be Doctor She-man’. They claim that the Bible calls women ‘she-man’ and therefore they deserve to ‘rule and govern as much as does the man’. The early Enlightenment thinker, Samuel Pufendorf, postulated in 1673 ‘that by nature all individuals have equal rights’ and that is why man does not rule by nature: ‘Whatever right a man has over a woman, inasmuch as she is his equal, will have to be secured by her consent, or by a just war.’<sup>28</sup> According to Luther as well as Mary Tattlewell and Joan Hit-him-home, women did not marry for their husbands’ sake but – despite all the pain – to have children.

Instead of the old, male form of misogamy, a new female form emerged. Mary Astell, a scholar and writer who never married, asserted that men married only to obtain a practical housekeeper, one ‘who may breed his Children, taking all the care and trouble of their Education, to preserve his Name’; and ‘one whom he can intirely Govern’, a ‘necessary evil’ (she used the early Christian expression). Freedom of choice as regards one’s spouse was a farce, Astell emphasized, and the only true choice was between such a marriage and remaining single. She thought it was ‘not good for a woman to marry’ and that is why women should ‘never consent to be a wife’. The *Précieuses* of the French *Âge classique* considered marriage a plague: ‘One marries only in order to hate and suffer.’ They discussed whether or not, and how, power could be divided up among the partners, such as by taking turns. In Germany, Hermann von Weinberg’s parents tried just that. They were supposed to alternate each week; sometimes they forgot whose turn it was, and when the wife insisted, her husband said, “‘True, it is your turn today and this week; I will be in charge next week’”, making fun of the arrangement’.<sup>29</sup> The *Précieuses* also considered living together without being married, or negotiating a marriage for a limited time; if the woman did not choose to extend the agreement, then the child would stay with the father and the mother would receive a severance payment and her freedom.

New ideas of philogamy did not lead to philogyny, much less female liberty, but they did lay the groundwork for future debate. The new Europa still had to choose between Zeus and her female companions. Protestantism, too, could not totally do without offering a way of life for women void of men; consequently, numerous Protestant women’s homes were

set up. In her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), Mary Astell demanded Protestant convents in England where women could devote themselves to religion, scholarship, teaching and contemplation. Astell found support for her proposal from other women. In the rest of Europe, women's congregations became widespread, taking on a broad spectrum of religious and social missions. Arcangela Tarabotti, who had written a defence maintaining that women were indeed human, wrote a work on the *condizione femmine*, complementing Dante's work on the *condizione umana*. After attacking the constraints of the convent in *Inferno monacale* (Nuns' Hell), Tarabotti also spoke out against the *ragion di stato*, the 'reason of state', of dowries, declaring that it would be more just if the men paid instead of the 'women having to buy themselves a husband'; and she opposed the maltreatment of women in marriage (*Il purgatorio delle malmaritate*). Finally, in *Il Paradiso monacale*, she envisioned what freedom was possible within the convent if one chose freely to be a nun.

### The Power of Fathers, the Power of Men, the Power of Women

If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?

Mary Astell, 1706

Christine de Pizan had argued that women as well as men had a capacity for political power and – as was common in the querelle – she provided many biblical, mythological and historical examples. In *Senatulus*, Erasmus of Rotterdam had his character Cornelia demand a *respublica foeminea* with a *reipublicae disciplina*: a women's parliament, like the bishops' and monks' councils, that would consult on 'our dignity and our interests'. Contrary to this vision, political power in Europe was given legitimacy through paternal, patriarchal authority by linking the 'father of the house', 'father of the country' and 'God the father' in both theology and politics. The ruling head of the household became the model for all power relations, and vice versa. Authority – secular and religious – was considered patriarchal. In the emergence of the modern state, matrimonial jurisdiction gradually shifted from the Church to the state and from local to central authorities. This was true especially in Protestant areas, but also to some extent in Catholic regions, in particular in France. Laws and jurisprudence developed a close pact between family and state structures from the sixteenth century, strictly regulating marriage, marital conditions and inheritance issues and subjecting them to royal authority. The new central state was based on male authority in both the family and the state. In England, the doctrine of divine right and the 'natural' right of kings was given legitimacy through God the father and

the 'natural' rule of the father over wife and children. This doctrine was taken to extremes at the same time as it was disputed. In *The Necessity of the Absolute Power of all Kings* (1648) and *Patriarcha* (1680), the 'flagship of Royalism', Robert Filmer justified royal authority on the basis of the authority of Adam over Eve and his children.

John Locke protested in his *Two Treatises on Government* (1689), claiming that legitimate political power originated from the voluntary association and consent of the subjects. Family relations, according to Locke, were pre-political and natural, not part of civil society. The father has no political power over his children – 'we are born free' – rather, he has only the duty to raise them properly. If paternal and political power were of the same kind, nonsense would result. All fathers would be kings and the king himself would reign only over his own children. But what of Eve? Although Locke collaborated with his learned companion, theologian Damaris Cudworth Masham, his conclusions on this issue were entirely his own, and, once again, a balancing act was called for. Locke insisted that conjugal society was a contract, that wives also had a right to own property (in sharp contrast to common law), and that divorce must be possible. But above all, God did not give Adam any real power over Eve, and certainly not political power. If that had been the case, more nonsense would result, since there would be 'as many Monarchs as there are Husbands'. Mother and father have equal authority over their children (the mother even more so since she was more involved in procreation than the man, who in contrast to her thinks only of the pleasures of sex). Their authority is not 'paternal' but 'parental'. If authority over children were confused with political power, a third kind of nonsense would result: women would have to have political power. Even for John Locke that would have been a topsy-turvy world, and his argument was made powerful by virtue of the paradox. The subordination of the woman is not political but 'conjugal', and thus natural: 'that Subjection they should ordinarily be in to their Husbands'. But how does that conform to the idea of marriage as a contract? And what happens in the event of a conflict over the 'common Interest and Property'? In such a case, there must be a 'last Determination' and some sort of 'Rule', which 'naturally falls to the Man's share, as the abler and the stronger'. This view would be widely shared in the future, as would the view of the relationship between family and political government. Locke's successful disavowal of patriarchal rule was based on a strict separation of political and gender relations, of civil society and the family. From this point on, the issue would no longer be the power of fathers but the power of men.

A response came promptly from Mary Astell. Attacking Locke, she argued in 1706 in the third edition of her *Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) against the supposed 'natural inferiority of our Sex'. In a way, she

agreed with Filmer when she claimed that power is power, whether in politics or in the family. But she also set Filmer straight, wanting to apply the new liberalism in politics to the family. If 'absolute sovereignty' was not necessary in the state and considered an evil, why should it exist in the family? It is even more unnecessary in the family, since man and woman – unlike government and subject – chose each other freely, or should do so. If 'Arbitrary Power is evil in itself, and an improper method of governing rational and free agents, it ought not to be practis'd anywhere'. In her view, absolute power was even more problematic within the family, since '100,000 tyrants are worse than one', and 'If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?'

Ninety years later, a growing number of women had further contemplated, both in writing and in public, the relationship between the sexes. It was then that the writer and governess Mary Wollstonecraft, like Astell, questioned the double standard for the political and the private (it was not Locke but Wollstonecraft who referred to the family as 'private'). 'Public virtue is only an aggregate of private', she argued, and 'every family might also be called a state.' She held reason to be especially important for women, in order for them to satisfy their private duties and take advantage of their rights. For their 'private virtue' to be 'a public benefit', women – whether married or not – needed a 'civil existence in the State'. Like many women of her time, Wollstonecraft admired Rousseau and his political doctrine. But also like others, she rejected his theory on gender, his postulate that women existed only to obey and delight men ('what nonsense!'), harshly inveighing against the notion that women had no reason and thus no virtue. This, she said, was women's main problem – not that they had no power. They had enough of that, but in an irrational way. Women used their supposed weakness, sensuality and sexuality in order to obtain privileges and illegitimate power: 'Women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization.' Women are slaves – 'in a political and civil sense' – precisely because 'indirectly they obtain too much power and are debased by their exertions to obtain illicit sway'. This applied to all women, according to Wollstonecraft, since all women were raised to exploit their sexual power, but particularly to the ladies of the court and the salons, who influenced cultural life especially in France and played an important role in the wrangling for power and career, both in and out of the royal court. The power of women was virtually a characteristic of the *ancien régime*, according to Wollstonecraft, in which they 'illicitly had great sway' – although, or perhaps because, they had 'no political existence' – 'corrupting themselves and the men with whose passions they played'. Women, 'as well as despots, have now, perhaps, more power than they would have if the world, divided and subdivided into

kingdoms and families, were governed by laws deduced from the exercise of reason'; but in obtaining such power, 'their character is degraded, and licentiousness spread through the whole aggregate of society'. Then Wollstonecraft became more specific. 'This is the very point I aim at: I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves', and 'It is not empire, – but equality, that they should contend for.'<sup>30</sup>

Of course, in the *ancien régime* women also had power – based not on the nature of their gender but on that of their 'blood'. The prominent humanist Sir Thomas Smith clearly distinguished between family duties in the eleventh and sixteenth chapters of his work *De Republica Anglorum* (1583). The husband has the task of earning and spending money, the wife is responsible for saving and 'nurriture' of the family, and 'each dothe governe' in their respective spheres. In politics, however, women could not rule except 'by right of blood'; that is, 'in such cases as the authoritie is annexed to the bloud and progenie, as the crowne, a dutchie, or an erledome for there the blood is respected, not the age nor the sexe'.

Nevertheless, gender did indeed play an important role. Queen Elizabeth (1533–1603) presented herself as a strong virgin – without husband or children – and, where a man was needed, as a man. When in 1588 the Spanish Armada set sail and the English troops were assembled in Tilbury, she appeared in armour. Although her body was weak, she told the men, she had 'the heart and stomach of a king and a king of England too'; she 'will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field'. Against the parliament, which wanted a successor, she insisted that as 'your natural mother . . . unto you all', she was more essential. Women reigned as queens in their own right, as queens at the side of their husbands, as sovereigns or as – often politically powerful – 'mistresses' in unofficial marriages. In France, where the Salic law of succession excluded from the throne all females and those males whose claim to rule was based on descent through a female (the rank of king could only be passed down through men), there was nonetheless an almost unbroken line of female regents from Louise of Savoy (1476–1531) to Anne of Austria (1601–66). Catherine de' Medici (1519–89) initially presented herself as a dutiful wife and later, always dressed in black, as a dutiful widow. Spain's rule of the Netherlands was traditionally put in the hands of a woman. Margaret of Parma (1522–86) was known for her tolerant regime. A female line of succession was introduced in England in 1688 in order to avoid the threat of Catholicism, which was embodied in the male succession to the throne. Empress Maria Theresa (1717–80) had ten children (and numerous miscarriages) and demonstrated her ability to rule by presenting herself as the ideal wife and mother. It had not been easy to find recognition for the female succession in the Hapsburg dynasty by all the European states (in the

Pragmatic Sanction of 1713). Catherine the Great (1729–96), empress of Russia, initially also presented herself as a dutiful wife of the heir to the throne; then she took power into her own hands and had many lovers. Christina of Sweden (1626–89) was designated from the outset to be queen and she therefore enjoyed a masculine upbringing, supervised by Count Axel Oxenstierna, who observed ‘with satisfaction . . . that Her Majesty is not like other members of her sex’, and thus ‘raises the highest hopes’.<sup>31</sup> She was fascinated by Cartesian thought, and corresponded with Descartes. In opposition to pressure by parliament, she resolutely refused to marry. She wanted to be an Amazon queen with a male mind in a female body. She wore men’s clothing and acted like a man. But she loved her autonomy more than her power and abdicated when she was twenty-nine years old, spending the rest of her life in freedom in Rome. The end of the eighteenth century was also the end of the epoch of powerful ruling women, even if Queen Victoria was able to continue the tradition.

Rousseau had foreseen this end in his republican project – both modern and anti-modern – in his *Lettre à d’Alembert* of 1758. ‘Whether a monarch governs men or women ought to be rather indifferent to him, provided that he be obeyed; but in a republic, men are needed.’ Rousseau was also a protagonist in the *querelle des sexes* and responded to that tradition in his writings. Rule by women was one of the main subjects of that querelle, not as a question of ‘blood’ but of gender. In England, John Knox wrote *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) on the occasion of the coronation of Mary Tudor and her half-sister Elizabeth. His concern was more with religion than sex, but the treatise was received and responded to as a statement in the battle of the sexes. The ‘justness, usefulness, and necessity of sexual difference in succession to the throne’, which was the rule in Germany, Italy, France and Spain, was presented in Germany as the result of a struggle between men and women (*Certamen masculo-foemineum*, 1602 and 1606). Marie de Gournay offered harsh criticism of Salic law in 1622 and was joined by many women. When the German poet Joseph von Eichendorff wrote of the ‘old as well as remarkable battle’ in 1847, it had long since entered a new stage.