

**WOMEN DURING THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE: EXCERPTS FROM WITINGS BY
CASTIGLIONE, ALBERTI, BRUTO, AND DE PISAN**

Baldassare Castiglione: From *The Courtier*

[Count Ludovico says:] "I think that what is chiefly important and necessary for the Courtier, in order to speak and write well, is knowledge; for he who is ignorant and has nothing in his mind that merits being heard, can neither say it nor write it.

"Next he must arrange in good order what he has to say or write; then express it well in words, which (if I do not err) ought to be precise, choice, rich and rightly formed....

"And this I say as well of writing as of speaking: in which however some things are required that are not needful in writing,--such as a good voice, not too thin and soft like a woman's, nor yet so stern and rough as to smack of the rustic's,--but sonorous, clear, sweet and well sounding, with distinct enunciation, and with proper bearing and gestures....

"But all these things would be vain and of small moment, if the thoughts expressed by the words were not beautiful, ingenious, acute, elegant and grave, according to the need.

"I would have him more than passably accomplished in letters, at least in those studies that are called the humanities, and conversant not only with the Latin language but with the Greek, for the sake of the many different things that have been admirably written therein. Let him be well versed in the poets, and not less in the orators and historians, and also proficient in writing verse and prose, especially in this vulgar tongue of ours....

"My lords, you must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he be also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read notes, he can play upon divers instruments. For if we consider rightly, there is to be found no rest from toil or medicine for the troubled spirit more becoming and praiseworthy in time of leisure, than this.... Thus it is no marvel that in both ancient and modern times they have always been inclined to favor musicians, and have found refreshing spiritual food in music....

"I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore think our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting.

"And do not marvel that I desire this art, which today may seem to savor of the artisan and little to befit a gentleman; for I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honorable and necessary thing, and it was admitted to the first rank of liberal arts; while by public edict they forbade that it be taught to slaves. Among the Romans too, it was held in highest honor. . . .

[The discussion turns to defining the court lady. Giuliano de' Medici addresses the company of ladies and gentlemen:] ". . . although my lord Gaspar has said that the same rules which are set the Courtier serve also for the Lady, I am of another mind; for while some qualities are common to both and as necessary to man as to woman, there are nevertheless some others that befit woman more than man, and some are befitting man to which she ought to be wholly a stranger. The same I say of bodily exercises; but above all, methinks that in her ways, manners, words, gestures and bearing a woman ought to be very unlike a man; for just as it befits him to show a certain stout and sturdy manliness, so it is becoming in a woman to have a soft and dainty tenderness with an air of womanly sweetness in her every movement....

"Now, if this precept be added to the rules that these gentlemen have taught the Courtier, I certainly think she ought to be able to profit by many of them, and to adorn herself with admirable accomplishments, as my lord Gaspar says. For I believe that many faculties of the mind are as necessary to woman as to man; likewise gentle birth, to avoid affectation, to be naturally graceful In all her doings, to be mannerly, clever, prudent, not arrogant. Not envious, not slanderous, not vain, not quarrelsome, not silly, to know how to win and keep the favor of her mistress and of all others, to practice well and

gracefully the exercises that befit women. I am quite of the opinion, too, that beauty is more necessary to her than to the Courtier, for in truth that woman lacks much who lacks beauty. .

[The Court Lady] "must have not only the good sense to discern the quality of him with whom she is speaking, but knowledge of many things, in order to entertain him graciously; and in her talk she should know how to choose those things that are adapted to the quality of him with whom she is speaking, and should be cautious lest occasionally, without intending it, she utter words that may offend him. Let her guard against wearying him by praising herself indiscreetly or by being too prolix. Let her not go about mingling serious matters with her playful or humorous discourse, or jests and jokes with her serious discourse. Let her not stupidly pretend to know that which she does not know, but modestly seek to do herself credit in that which she does know,--in all things avoiding affectation, as has been said. In this way she will be adorned with good manners, and will perform with perfect grace the bodily exercises proper to women; her discourse will be rich and full of prudence, virtue and pleasantness: and thus she will be not only loved but revered by everyone, and perhaps worthy to be placed side by side with this great Courtier as well in qualities of the mind as in those of the body. . . .

"Since I may fashion this Lady as I wish, not only am I unwilling to have her practice such vigorous and rugged manly exercises, but I would have her practice even those that are becoming to women, circumspectly and with that gentle daintiness which we have said befits her; and thus in dancing I would not see her use too active and violent movements, nor in singing or playing those abrupt and oft-repeated diminutions which show more skill than sweetness; likewise the musical instruments that she uses ought, in my opinion, to be appropriate to this intent. Imagine how unlovely it would be to see a woman play drums, fifes or trumpets, or other like instruments; and this because their harshness hides and destroys that mild gentleness which so much adorns every act a woman does. Therefore when she starts to dance or make music of any kind, she ought to bring herself to it by letting herself be urged a little, and with a touch of shyness which shall show that noble shame which is the opposite of effrontery....

"And to repeat in a few words part of what has been already said, I wish this Lady to have knowledge of letters, music, painting, and to know how to dance and make merry; accompanying the other precepts that have been taught the Courtier with discreet modesty and with the giving of a good impression of herself. And thus, in her talk, her laughter, her play, her jesting, in short, in everything, she will be very graceful, and will entertain appropriately, and with witticisms and pleasantries befitting her, everyone who shall come before her. . . .

Leon Battista Alberti: From *Book of the Family*

[*Lionardo*]:...They say that in choosing a wife one looks for beauty, parentage, and riches. The beauty of a man accustomed to arms, it seems to me, lies in his having a presence betokening pride, limbs full of strength, and the gestures of one who is skilled and adept in all forms of exercise. The beauty of an old man, I think, lies in his prudence, his amiability, and the reasoned judgment which permeates all his words and his counsel. Whatever else may be thought beautiful in an old man, certainly it differs sharply from what constitutes beauty in a young cavalier. I think that beauty in a woman, likewise, must be judged not only by the charm and refinement of her face, but still more by the grace of her person and her aptitude for bearing and giving birth to many fine children.

Among the most essential criteria of beauty in a woman is an honorable manner. Even a wild, prodigal, greasy, drunken woman may be beautiful of feature, but no one would call her a beautiful wife. A woman worthy of praise must show first of all in her conduct, modesty, and purity. Marius, the illustrious Roman, said in that first speech of his to the Roman people: "Of women we require purity, of men labor." And I certainly agree. There is nothing more disgusting than a coarse and dirty woman. Who is stupid enough not to see clearly that a woman who does not care for neatness and cleanliness in her appearance, not only in her dress and body but in all her behavior and language, is by no means well mannered? How can it be anything but obvious that a bad mannered woman is also rarely virtuous? We

shall consider elsewhere the harm that comes to a family from women who lack virtue, for I myself do not know which is worse fate for a family, total celibacy or a single dishonored woman. In a bride, therefore, a man must first seek beauty of mind, that is, good conduct and virtue.

In her body he must seek not only loveliness, grace, and charm but must also choose a woman who is well made for bearing children, with the kind of constitution that promises to make them strong and big. There's an old proverb, "When you pick your wife, you choose your children." All her virtues will in fact shine brighter still in beautiful children. It is a well-known saying among poets: "Beautiful character dwells in a beautiful body." The natural philosophers require that a woman be neither thin nor very fat. Those laden with fat are subject to coldness and constipation and slow to conceive. They say that a woman should have a joyful nature, fresh and lively in her blood and her whole being. They have no objections to a dark girl. They do reject girls with a frowning black visage, however. They have no liking for either the undersized or the overlarge and lean. They find that a woman is most suited to bear children if she is fairly big and has limbs of ample length. They always have a preference for youth, based on a number of arguments which I need not expound here, but particularly on the point that a young girl has a more adaptable mind. Young girls are pure by virtue of their age and have not developed any spitefulness. They are by nature modest and free of vice. They quickly learn to accept affectionately and unresistingly the habits and wishes of their husbands.

These things then are the logical outcome of our inquiry. They are the things it makes sense to keep in mind in order to find and select a well-suited, prolific wife. To all this I might add one more point, that it is an excellent sign if a girl has a great number of brothers and no sisters. It is reasonable to hope that she will, when she is yours, fare like her mother.

Now we have spoken of beauty. Let us next consider parentage, and what are the qualities to look for there. I think the first problem in choosing a family is to investigate closely the customs and habits of one's new relatives. Many marriages have ruined the family, as one may hear and read every day, because they involved union with a litigious, quarrelsome, arrogant, and malevolent set of men....

To sum up this whole subject in a few words, for I want above all to be brief on this point, let a man get himself new kinsmen of better than plebeian blood, of a fortune more than diminutive, of a decent occupation, and of modest and respectable habits. Let them not be too far above himself, lest their greatness overshadow his own honor and position. Too high a family may disturb his own and his family's peace and tranquility, and also, if one of them falls, you cannot help to support him without collapsing or wearing yourself out as you stagger under a weight too great for your arms and your strength. I also do not want the new relatives to rank too low, for while the first error puts you in a position of servitude, the second causes expense. Let them be equals, then, and, to repeat, modest and respectable people.

The matter of dowry is next, which I would like to see middling in size, certain and prompt rather than large, vague, or promised for an indefinite future. I know not why everyone, as if corrupted by a common vice, takes advantage of delay to grow lazy in paying debts. Sometimes, in cases of marriage, people are further tempted because they hope to evade payment altogether....

...The larger the payments are to be and the longer they are to be carried, the more discussion you will be forced into, the more reluctantly you will be paid, and the more obliged you will feel to spend inordinate sums for all sorts of things. There will be indescribable bitterness and often totally ruinous results in setting dowries very high. We have said now how a wife is to be selected from outside and how she is to be received into the house. It remains to be seen how she is to be treated once she is within.

Battista: I would not interrupt your rapid exposition, if you had not yourself given me leave to do it. But it would help to stop a moment and let me turn my head to fix in my memory what you have traversed to this point, if I can remember it rightly. You have said, I gather, that one should select a virtuous woman of good parentage, one well dowered and suited to bear a fair number of sons. All these things are very difficult. Lionardo, do you think one could easily find them all combined in one woman, let alone in as many as a large family like ours requires? In various marriages I have noted that if a girl is

well born she often comes without dowry. There is even a common saying, "If you desire gold, take her ugly or old." It is my impression that we regulate our lives rather like the ancient Thracians, among whom ugly virgins purchased their husbands at high prices, while, for the beautiful girls, sums to be paid were established by official assessors. Do you see what I mean, Lionardo?

Lionardo: I do see, and I am glad you listened so patiently to what we have been saying so far. I am glad, too, that you did not let me run on like this. For, yes, it is as you say: all marriages cannot be as I wish. Nor can all wives be like that Cornelia, the daughter of Metellus Scipio, who was married to Publius Crassus, a woman who was beautiful, well educated, skilled in music, geometry, and philosophy, and, most praiseworthy of all in a woman of such abilities and virtue, not at all haughty or aloof or demanding. But let us take the advice of the slave girl, Birria, in Terence: "If you can't do what you want, want what you can do." One marries the girl who seems to have less faults than the others. One does not give up beauty for parentage or parentage in order to get a dowry. Cato, who excelled as the father of a family, used to praise the girl who showed an old fashioned refinement of manners above the one who was loaded with money. Personally, I can well believe that both may be, rather forward and self-willed, but that the one born and brought up not in the luxurious shade of wealth but under the bright influence of good character and habits will probably be a little more sensitive about bringing shame on herself and far more obedient. One takes a wife, in fact, mainly to have children by her. One then considers, further, that good kinsmen are a more reliable advantage than good fortune. They are worth more, in the judgment of good men, than wealth. Wealth is a fleeting and perishable thing, while kinsmen, if you think of them as such and treat them accordingly, remain kinsmen forever....

Battista: Is there anything else to be said? I thought there was no more to add.

Lionardo: So you think. When I realize that I have left out something so primary and altogether essential as this, how much more that is valuable and relevant may not now be fleeing away ahead of me or hiding unnoticed behind? But this one thing, which is highly significant and notable, I am glad has occurred to me in time. I say that when you have chosen your wife and decided on the girl you like best, when you have received the advice and permission of all your elders, and when she is highly pleasing to you and to your family for her ways and her beauty, then the first thing you ought to do is as Xenophon has the good husband say to Socrates: pray to God that he graciously grant that your bride will be fertile, and that you may always have peace and honor in your house. Address God with abundant piety, for these are the things essential to a wife and without which suffering abounds. With them, on the other hand, a man is happy and grateful for what are truly the gifts of God. Not every man who seeks finds a good wife. Not every man who would like a faithful wife has one, though some perhaps think they have. On the contrary, it has always been a rare and singular favor of God to settle a man with a wholly peaceable wife whose character is above reproach. One may consider oneself lucky if one's wife never gives rise to scandal or disgrace. Blessed is he who is not afflicted with grief through having a bad wife. Many should be the prayers addressed to God, therefore, that he may grant the young husband a wife who will prove good, peaceful, honorable, and, as we have said, prolific. This I repeat: one should never cease praying to God that he may keep one's wife faithful, tranquil, and loving.

Giovanni Michele Bruto

This is a passage from Bruto which well shows the usual grounds given for denying altogether a liberal education to women. The quotation is taken from Salter's translation.

"I am therefore of this advise, that it not mete nor convenient for a Maiden to be taught or trained up in learning of humane arts, in whom a virtuous demeanor and honest behavior, would be a more sightlier ornament, then the light or vain glory of learning, for in learning and studying of the arts there are two things finally proposed to us, that is recreation and profit, touching profit, that is not to be looked for, at the hands of her that is given us for a companion in our labors, but rather every woman ought wholly to

be active and diligent about the government of her household and family, and touching recreation by learning that cannot be granted her, without great danger and offence to the beauty and brightness of her mind; saying then that the government of estates and public weales are not committed into the hands of women, neither that it is lawful or convenient for them to write laws, by which men should be ruled and governed, as Draco, Licurgus, and Numa Pompilius did, neither as professors of Science and faculty, to teach in Schools the wisdom of Laws and Philosophy, and seeing also that in such studies, as yield recreation and pleasure, there is no less danger, that they will as well learn to be subtle and shameless Lovers, as cunning and skillful writers, of Ditties, Sonnet's, Epigrams, and Ballades, let them be restrained to the care and government of a family, and teach them to be envious in following those, that by true virtue have made little account of those, that to the prejudice of their good names, have been desirous to be reputed Diotimes, Aspaties, Sapphoes, and Corinnes. For such as compare the small profit of learning with the great hurt and damage that comes to them by the same shall soon perceive (although that they remain obstinate therein) how far more convenient the Distaff, and Spindle, Needle and Thimble were for them with a good and honest reputation, then the skill of well using a pen or writing a lofty verse with defame and dishonor, if in the same there be more erudition then virtue."

Christine de Pisan: From *Book of the City of the Ladies*

Just decades after Boccaccio took the woman's view in the "Tale of Filippa," the world's first feminist writer, Christine de Pisan (1365-1428?), emerged in France. The daughter of an Italian physician, Christine wedded a French nobleman when she was fifteen—medieval women usually married in their mid to late teens. Ten years later, when her husband died, Christine was left to support three children, a task she met by becoming the first female professional writer. Christine attacked the long antifemale tradition that had demeaned women and denied them the right to a university education. Her feminism is all the more significant because it occurred in a time in which men were making systematic efforts to restrict female inheritance of land and female membership in the guilds.

*Christine was keenly aware of the fact that Western literary tradition did not offer a representative picture of women's importance to society. Eager to correct this inequity, she became a spokesperson for female achievements and talents. In her *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), Christine attacks male misogyny and exalts the accomplishments of famous women throughout the ages. Patterned as an allegorical debate, *The City of Ladies* pictures Christine herself "interviewing" three goddesses--Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice--as she seeks moral guidance on matters such as whether women can and should be educated in the same manner as men and why men claim it is not good for women to be educated at all.*

Book I. 27 Christine Asks Reason Whether God Has Ever Wished to Ennoble the Mind of Woman With the Loftiness of the Sciences; and Reason's Answer.

... please enlighten me again, whether it has ever pleased this God, who has bestowed so many favors on women, to honor the feminine sex with the privilege of the virtue of high understanding and great learning, and whether women ever have a clever enough mind for this. I wish very much to know this because men maintain that the mind of women can learn only a little."

She answered, "My daughter, since I told you before, you know quite well that the opposite of their opinion is true, and to show you this even more clearly, I will give you proof through examples. I tell you again--and don't doubt the contrary--if it were customary to send daughters to school like sons, and if they were then taught the natural sciences, they would learn as thoroughly and understand the subtleties of all the arts and sciences as well as sons. And by chance there happen to be such women, for, as I touched on before, just as women have more delicate bodies than men, weaker and less able to perform many tasks, so do they have minds that are freer and sharper whenever they apply themselves."

"My lady, what are you saying? With all due respect, could you dwell longer on this point, please. Certainly men would never admit this answer is true, unless it is explained more plainly, for they believe that one normally sees that men know more than women do."

She answered, "Do you know why women know less?"

"Not unless you tell me, my lady."

"Without the slightest doubt, 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, and there is nothing which so instructs a reasonable creature as the exercise and experience of many different things."

"My lady, since they have minds skilled in conceptualizing and learning, just like men, why don't women learn more?"

She replied, "Because, my daughter, the public does not require them to get involved in the affairs which men are commissioned to execute, just as I told you before. It is enough for women to perform the usual duties to which they are ordained. As for judging from experience, since one sees that women usually know less than men. that therefore their capacity for understanding is less, look at men who farm the flatlands or who live in the mountains. You will find that in many countries they seem completely savage because they are so simple-minded. All the same, there is no doubt that Nature provided them with the qualities of body and mind found in the wisest and most learned men. All of this stems from a failure to learn, though, just as I told you, among men and women, some possess better minds than others...."

Book II. 36 Against Those Men Who Claim It Is Not Good for Women to Be Educated.

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

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

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

"Similarly, to speak of more recent times, without searching for examples in ancient history, Giovanni Andrea, a solemn law professor in Bologna not quite sixty years ago, was not of the opinion that it was bad for women to be educated. He had a fair and good daughter, named Novella, who was

educated in the law to such an advanced degree that when he was occupied by some task and not at leisure to present his lectures to his students, he would send Novella, his daughter, in his place to lecture to the students from his chair. And to prevent her beauty from distracting the concentration of her audience, she had a little curtain drawn in front of her. In this manner she could on occasion supplement and lighten her father's occupation. He loved her so much that, to commemorate her name, he wrote a book of remarkable lectures on the law which he entitled *Novella super Decretalium*, after his daughter's name.

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

And I, Christine, replied to all of this, "Indeed, my lady, what you say is as true as the Lord's Prayer."