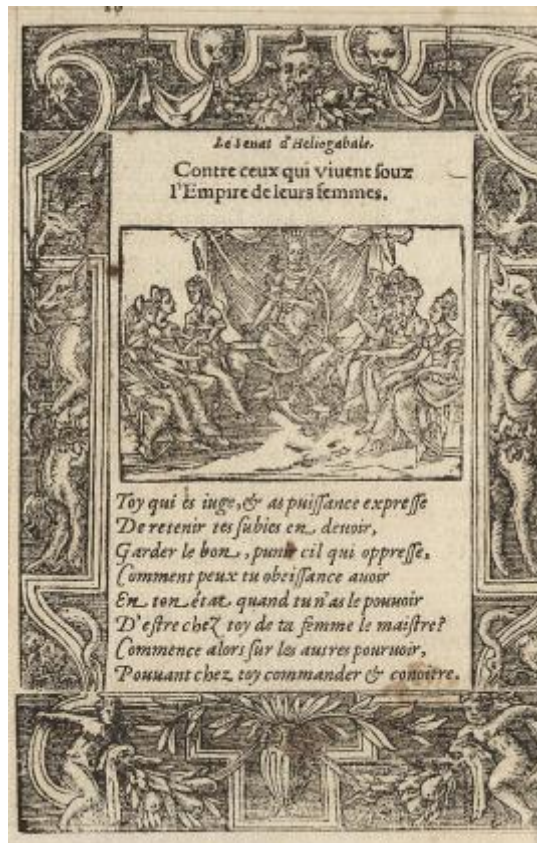


# The *Querelle des dames* during the Renaissance

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## ABSTRACT

In the early fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan became involved in a debate between the opponents and defenders of women: she challenged the clerics who wrote against women and the fight to end slander in their regard. She fought those lettered persons who tried to establish the incapacity of women in certain functions of the body and intelligence, and who always took the same approach: demonstrating the link between the nature of the female sex and female abilities, with female anatomy determining intellectual inferiority. The *Querelle des dames* (The Controversy About Women) was born in France, and subsequently spread to the rest of Europe. In the sixteenth century, this first *querelle* (controversy) continued with the *Querelle des amyes* (Controversy of Lady Friends), a literary sparring match whose public expanded with the printing press, as these discourses were translated into vernacular languages and published outside of France.



Pierre Cousteau, "Contre ceux qui vivent souz l'empire de leurs femmes" (Against those who live under the control of their wives"), Le Pegme, Lyon, Barthelemy Molin, 1560. In this book of emblems—works presenting a succession of maxims associated with a poem illustrated by a drawing—by Pierre Cousteau (died 1567), a number of chapters discuss women's condition, and convey messages hostile to women in positions of power. They are illustrated with an image of Simiamire—the mother of the Roman Emperor Heliogabalus, whom he authorized to sit in the Senate—seated on a throne and discussing with other women. Source : [archive.org](https://www.archive.org)



Christine de Pizan and the Queens of the City teaching Ladies. BnF, fr. 25294, f°  
6v. Source : Gallica/Bnf.

A controversy known as the *Querelle des dames* emerged in the late Middle Ages regarding women's role in society and their capacities and rights to play the same roles as men. In certain respects this dispute has endured to the present. Three major questions were debated: marriage and love, the education of girls, and the power of women.

This controversy was in keeping with a complex social, economic, and political turning point that saw rising inequality between the sexes throughout Europe. It began in France, where the dynastic crisis of the early fourteenth century led to the formalization of the Salic law, under which women were declared unfit to inherit or transmit the crown. The controversy bitterly divided the small circle of early Parisian humanism. Jean de Montreuil (1354-1418) initiated the debate with an apology for the second part of the *Roman de la rose*, written in the thirteenth century by Jean de Meung, and very hostile to women and the ideal of courtly love. Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) responded with a succession of letters and treatises. In 1405 she wrote her major work, *La Cité des dames*. Her demonstration was built on the model of the collective biography by the Italian humanist Boccaccio, entitled *De mulieribus Claris (On Famous Women)*. Christine de Pizan challenged the clerics writing against women. She fought against the "*clergie*" (clerics and learned persons collectively) who tried to prove the physical and intellectual incapacity of women by establishing a link between the female anatomy and women's intellectual capacities.

De Pizan was not the only one to defend women. She was joined in Paris by Jean Gerson, the chancellor of the university, which was however closed to women. In 1442, the Savoy poet

Martin Le Franc wrote *Le Champion des dames* (The Champion of Women), in which he condemned and rewrote the *Roman de la rose*. From this point onward, debates regarding gender (in)equality spread to English-, German-, Spanish-, and Italian-speaking spaces. In England, the mystic Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438) called for the same freedom of expression as men. In Spain, the humanist Juan Rodríguez de la Cámara (1390-1450) defended women against misogynistic attacks.

However, nothing would stop the *clergie*. A book of rare violence enjoyed success in the late fifteenth century, one that continued into the sixteenth century: *The Hammer of Witches*, written by two Dominicans from the Rhine, Henricus Institor and Jacob Sprenger. Its explicit goal was to do away with the “time of the woman.” It made witchcraft an almost exclusively feminine practice, and sparked an open war. Entrenched positions were also present on the other side. In 1509, the Swiss humanist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) wrote *On the Nobility and Excellence of the Feminine Sex*, whose original Latin version was quickly diffused, and then translated into French, German, English, and Italian. At the same time, catalogs of famous women and discourses on female superiority were translated and circulated in Europe in response to misogynistic texts.

New writings regularly rekindled new controversies on specific subjects. Alain Chartier’s *Belle Dame sans mercy* (1425, *The Beautiful Lady Without Pity*)—who incessantly rebuffs the advances of her lover—triggered a century-long debate regarding love. In the 1540s, Bertrand de La Borderie, Charles Fontaine, and Antoine Héroët wrote three treatises on “*amyés*” (lady friends), responding to one another over whether women are cruel and cynical in love and marriage, or virtuous and faithful. They challenged or supported the arguments in Baldassare Castiglione’s *Corteggiano* (1528), which was translated throughout the continent, and defended the tradition of courtly love as well as the model of a woman with many qualities, highly educated and even philosophical. This literary sparring match gained traction in the court of Marguerite de Navarre, the sister of Francis I of France, where a neoplatonist conception of life held sway, revolving around love and reason.

The *Querelle* took on unexpected proportions with the rise of the printing press, as the readership grew and works were published in large numbers, reaching beyond the limited circle of the court and *clergie*. In England, Jane Anger responded to misogynistic attacks in *Her Protection for Women* in 1589. In Spain, Oliva Sabuco took part in the medical debate in 1587 by refuting the gender hierarchy in her *Nueva filosofía de la naturaleza del hombre*. At the same time in France, the succession crisis sparked by the absence of an heir for the last of the Valois (Henry III of France) brought back the Salic law during the legal debate surrounding the rights of the future Henry IV of France, who was the direct successor on the male side, but a Protestant.

Among the topics discussed, power became a major issue during the Renaissance. The question of government by women was raised with regard to a state, a fiefdom, and even her home. Feudal law authorized women to receive lands as a gift or as part of an inheritance: the Duchess Anne of Brittany, or Marie of Burgundy in the Netherlands, succeeded their respective fathers. Nothing prevented them from governing as regents, even in countries where the Salic law was in effect. Anne of France was regent while her brother Charles VIII of France (1483-1491) was a minor, as was Catherine de’ Medici when her sons were minors; Anne d’Alençon managed Monferrato (Italy) throughout the reign of her son Bonifacio (1518-1530), while Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (1500-1558), entrusted the government

of Spain and the Netherlands to the women of his family during his absences. However, beginning in the fifteenth century, there were debates against giving women access to power, with the conflict between the daughters of Henry IV of Castile or the regency of Isabella d'Este in Mantua (1509-1512). They intensified in the sixteenth century with Mary I of England (Mary Tudor) and her sister Elizabeth, as well as with Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, and Jeanne d'Albret in Navarre. In the British Isles, the reformer John Knox launched *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) against the "tyranny" of the Catholic Mary I of England, which he deemed contrary to nature, law, and the will of God; the dispute it sparked resonated for over three decades and spread across the continent.

In France, while the end of the wars of religion once again marked the triumph of the Salic law with regard to the state, some local customs (laws) still recognized the legal capacity of women, who had rights and used them. With the accumulation of these scholarly commentaries, judges tried to establish the incapacity of women for certain functions. They argued in support of gender difference and the fragility of the female sex, as opposed to the prerogative of the male sex and its dignity. Their goal was to exclude women from their economic and social roles in order to establish a new social and political order to the advantage of men. By excluding women from their inheritance rights they fostered the circulation of goods, and by abolishing the rights of girls they substituted gender hierarchy for the order of birth. The *imbecillitas sexus* argument affirmed the preeminence of husbands. Fragile women had to be limited to obedience, and could no longer command men or govern a state. During the second half of the seventeenth century, sexual inequality took hold against the customs of the society of orders. In France, the language itself reflects this transition, as the masculine henceforth prevailed over the feminine.

The *Querelle des femmes*, which became a topic of research in the twentieth century, has primarily been studied by literary scholars. In history, this controversy has very often been ignored, with a few exceptions: Gisela Bock and Claudia Opitz in the German-speaking world; Monica Bolufer and Montserrat Cabré in Spain; Marie-Élisabeth Henneau in Belgium; and the historians of ideas Éliane Viennot and Armel Dubois-Nayt in France. The *Querelle des femmes* remains a European history to be written.

With the collaboration of Éliane Viennot and Armel Dubois-Nayt.

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