

Words in Favour of Women

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Thirty years ago I published in *Medium Aevum* a short article entitled “Words against Women.”¹ It was a brief edition and commentary on some anti-feminist lines found in the manuscript Vatican Reg. lat. 1659. The lines were used to fill up an empty column and seem to have been linked to a longer passage in the Vatican copy of a moralising debate poem, the *Petit Plet* by the Anglo-Norman poet Chardri.² *The Petit Plet* lines are marked in this manuscript by drawings of hands with the index finger pointing to particular couplets that deal with the unflattering characteristics of women. If there are many medieval texts that clearly see women in an unfavourable light, there are, however, a few that speak out in praise of women; in this paper I present some aspects of one of those, an unpublished poem in defence of women that Professor Françoise Viellard of the École nationale des Chartes and I are in the process of editing. Though this paper may be intended primarily to remind us of that rather small literary current, it also underlines the value of hunting through manuscripts ostensibly devoted to one subject but where marginalia and fill-in material can reveal a few unknown gems which often pass unrecorded—or at least passed over in the standard catalogues.

The roots of literary anti-feminism are long and well-established in the French and Latin traditions, going back at least to St Jerome's *Contra Jovinianum*³ and continued in such compositions as the Goliardic *De conjuge non ducenda*.⁴ As Wendy Pfeffer notes in presenting a short French poem in praise of women, *La louange des femmes*, even works seen to glorify a heroine can borrow from the anti-feminist tradition to describe what the heroine emphatically is not.⁵ In the general context of the so-called courtly heroine, there are texts in which attitudes to women are far from worshipful. Take for instance the example of the Anglo-Norman *Lai del désiré* where a difference in class can seem to justify the brutality of a near-rape scene.⁶ In the *fabliaux* the shrewdness and the skill of women are double-edged instruments in the argument. Much has been written by medievalists on this theme.

There seem, however, to be fewer poems straightforwardly in praise or defence of women. Of course there are poems devoted to the Virgin, and works in which the courtly heroine possesses all virtue and unparalleled beauty, but few in which the merits of women as a sex are presented. In their 1989 book, *Three Medieval Views of Women*, Gloria Fiero, Wendy Pfeffer and Mathé Allain edited one such poem, the *Bien des fames*.⁷ Over a century earlier Paul Meyer drew attention to the pro-woman current in French medieval literature with notices and editions of two poems, the *Plaidoyer en faveur des femmes* found in British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra A. viii.⁸ and the *Bounté des femmes* existing in several copies.⁹ In presenting the first work, Meyer mentions other texts against and in favour of women. The late John L. Grigsby published the *Miroir des bonnes femmes*, a counter in thirty stories to a *Miroir des mauvaises femmes*, both from the late thirteenth century.¹⁰ These poems use exempla from classical antiquity, history and legend and of course hagiography. In the poem presented in this paper and which is much later in time than its predecessors—probably from the first half of the fifteenth century—the main examples of women deserving of praise come from the Bible and from history. In particular, it concentrates on those women who distinguished themselves as warriors. There are obviously echoes here of the women in Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames* and of texts that derive from the debate over the *Roman de la Rose*. One such text that is part of the “Querelle du Roman de la Rose,” and only recently edited in full, is the *Champion des Dames* by the Genevois Martin le Franc.¹¹ Our poem written in defence of women is found in an Angers manuscript that we have been analysing on account of its principal text, a vast and complex French-Latin dictionary. The *Catalogue général des manuscrits* (vol. 31) gives a brief indication of the poem's existence but no edition has yet appeared.

The manuscript setting of this unedited poem in defence of women is worth describing. In the Bibliothèque municipale of Angers there are two volumes, 497 and 498, that comprise two thirds of the unusual French-Latin dictionary I have mentioned. They are both substantial volumes: the first contains 621 folios, and covers the letters G to P; the second contains 561 folios covering Q to Z. A first volume, which would have contained the letters A-E, is missing. The manuscript is placed by *Catalogue général des manuscrits* in the fifteenth century and our own examination of the watermarks suggests that it is likely to have been compiled between 1440-50. One of the most interesting features of this dictionary is its form, both from its apparent method of compilation and its internal structures.

Each letter in the Angers dictionary begins with an index of French words listed in AB and ABC alphabetical order and followed by a Roman numeral which refers to the folio of the letter in question. Each letter is individually numbered but only for those folios in which articles are written down. The pages of indices, for example, are not given Roman numbering. The articles themselves are unusual in that the headwords are in French and nearly all the definitional material is in Latin. Most bilingual glossaries and dictionaries of the time were Latin-French. The structure of many articles is to provide a series of Latin equivalents or near-equivalents to the French headword, often with the derivational family of each Latin term accompanying the prime word. For example, *grant* is defined by *magnus*, *eximius* and *grandis* with some derivational terms from each. In some cases the list of derivations is long, and we enter into structures that are reminiscent of Hugutio's *Magnae derivationes*.

A summary of the general method of compilation allows us to understand how a poem may have turned up in a dictionary text. The compiler must surely have been copying an earlier work, though he may well have had additional material to append to some of the articles of his compilation. First, it seems, he wrote out the French headwords in bold lettering, leaving ample space in most cases for the Latin definitions which were to be written in later. Next, he probably numbered the folios of each letter. The articles as they were laid out in the dictionary were not set down in alphabetical order nor in any other order we can determine. There was a need, therefore, to provide a roughly alphabetical index preceding each letter. As a result, a fairly alphabetical index was written down with each French term followed by its appropriate folio number. The compilation process was approximate, at times leaving insufficient space for articles, at others producing empty columns, even pages. Space was often left between letters. This allowed the compiler to introduce extracts from a number of texts from a variety of authors, among them St Gregory, St Bernard, St Anselm, St Ambrose, Helinand, Hugh of Foletto, Gratian, some Aesop fables in Latin, and Cato, and also to include excerpts from the rules of St Benedict and St Augustine.¹²

All of the texts mentioned are of course in Latin, but there are two pieces in French, both in what is now the second volume (the original third). The first is in prose and comes between the folios containing the letters P and Q. It briefly relates a discussion between Alexander and the philosopher Diogenes on the nature of wisdom and power. This is a common story that is found in Petrus Alfonsi's *Disciplina clericalis* and in several derivative texts. In brief, Alexander asks the philosopher why

he, Alexander, is not held in high respect, since he is such a powerful king. Diogenes replies that he will have nothing do with the “serf de mon serf.” His, Diogenes’, will conquers the desire for all things, and is thus his slave, which he crushes under his foot, while Alexander is slave himself to desire. Thus Diogenes masters that which holds Alexander enslaved. There are some other aphoristic statements and the piece finishes with the moral: “Science ne prouffite a foul ne sens a celi qui n’en use.”

The second piece is the poem under consideration in this study, a piece “en l’honneur des femmes.” This poem of 250 lines in octosyllabic couplets falls between the end of the letter T and the beginning of the letter U.

The beginning seems rather banal:

Pour ce que souvent sans raison	[428r]
et sans trouver bonne achaison,	
pluseurs hommes parlent de femmes	
en deshonneur et en diffammes	4
et tout le pis qu'ilz peuent en dient	
et ad ce faire s'estudient,	
qu'est deshonneste chose et vile	8
ou soit aux champs ou a la ville,	
m'est prins au cuer grant appetit	
de parler d'elles un petit	
et en honneur ramentevoir	
en racomptant tretout le voir:	12
ad ce vueil ge un peu labourer.	

We must honour, praise and love women, he continues, for rich and poor we have all come from women and it would be fatuous to condemn our own birth. They have struggled to give us birth and to nourish us, so man cannot condemn them but rather love them with a full heart. If there is any woman who falls by the wayside and fails to keep her honour that happens through men, whom scripture determines to be the stronger and who must bear the responsibility, for women are weaker and less able to defend themselves.

Some say there are women who are angry, blameworthy and cruel enough to beat their husbands but that is a side issue. There are women who put up with a lot:

Et meschamment se gouverne:
 il porte tout a la taverne 68
 et puis, quant il a bien beü
 et mengé quanqu'il a peü,
 il se rent a l'ostel tout ivre,
 tout effronté comme une guyvre; 72
 lors sa pouvre femme est batue [429v]
 et traÿnee et abatue,
 il n y a rien qu'il ne triboille:
 s'il y a pot au feu qui boille, 76
 il fiert du pié sans plus atendre
 et met pot et potee en cendre,
 il tourmente femme et enfans.

There are, he says, one hundred thousand stupid husbands like him in France whose flesh should be fed to the wolves. In many places there are women who know half as well again how to run a household and a family and that is the pure truth.

It is at this point, after ninety-four lines, that the argument shifts to history and the poet presents examples of courageous women from the past.

The first example is of the queen of the Amazons—unnamed, but undoubtedly Penthesilea—who came to the aid of King Priam in the defence of Troy. Their warrior society was many years later well established when they were challenged by Alexander the Great to submit to his authority. Their queen—again unnamed, and presumably Talestris—sent a letter to Alexander:

“Haut roy noble et de grant puissance,
 de ton sens et de ta prudence 132
 se doit on assez merveiller
 qui ton oust veulz appareiller
 pour faire sur femmes conqueste.
 Le fait te sera peu honneste, 136
 quar si fortune tant nous fit
 que par femmes soys desconfit
 et nous en venon au dessus,
 tu seras a jamais confus. 140

Were he to win, the letter adds, the credit would be small because the victory would have been over “pouvres femelles, pouvres dammes et domaiselles.” Alexander, of course, is persuaded to recognise their merit.

The next example is the biblical story of Deborah and Jaël. The account in our poem is brief, but it gives the essence of Judges chapter 4, how Jaël, wife of Heber, received Sisera, chief of the Canaanites in her tent, and gave him both drink and rest. While Sisera lay asleep Jaël drove a peg into his brain and he died. Deborah wrote a psalm about the event.

Then follows in four lines the example of Esther:

Que fist Hester pour Mardochee?
 La teste Aman en fut broche 176
 qui servoit le roy Assuaire
 et aux Juifs estoit contraire.

This story is from the book of *Esther*. Esther, protectress of the Jews, was favoured by king Ahasuerus in whose court Haman gained ascendancy and forced courtiers to submit to him. But Mordecai the Jew would not submit and Haman contrived to accuse all Jews of treachery. Haman's own treachery was revealed by Esther, and the gallows intended for Mordecai became instead the instrument of Haman's death. The biblical story does not mention “la tête Aman.”

Que fist Judith de Olofernés?
 El li baila son derrain mes 180
 et li fist voler a un ton
 la teste desus le menton
 quar injustement tourmentoit
 le peuple et le persecutoit. 184

The story of Judith comes from the Apocrypha. It was she who came to the tent of Holofernes, drugged him with wine and soft words, and slew him while he slept.

Brief mention is made of Anne, possibly the prophetess, also mentioned in the *Miroir des bonnes femmes*, and of Susannah whom Daniel saved by his skills as a defender in court. Two elders, both of whom desired Susannah, had accused her of adultery. In court Daniel asks each separately under what kind of tree they observed

the adulterous act. Unable to give the same answer, they are both put to death for their lies.

A last example is intriguing. It concerns the women of Marseilles:

Mais uncore assez grant merveille firent les femmes de Marseille:	
Avint que les Marsiliens par leurs ennemis anciens	196
furent durement guerroyez et estoit tant afoabloiez qu'ilz n'avoit garnison ne vivre, ne chose dom peüssent vivre,	200
ne ne savoint plus conseil prendre en tout leur fait, si non se rendre. Quant leurs femmes virent ce cas, ilz distrent qu'ilz ne rendroint pas par tele occasion la ville:	204
“Nous suymes bien femmes .III. mille. Il faut que nous soion armees de bacinez, lances, espees.	208
Nous iron parsus la muraille bien armees et fust en bataille. Quant ilz verront, ne doubtiez mie, aux querneaux tele compaignie	[432v] 212
ilz s'escrieront, foibles et fors, dom leur est venu tel effors et s'en fuiront grant et petit.”	

And so it happened; to this day the women of Marseilles hold the honour of being permitted to wear golden crowns on their heads on days of celebration.

This reference to the women of Marseilles is not found in any of the standard histories of the city, but my colleague Françoise Vielliard has noted these lines of another text devoted to defending women, *Le Champion des Dames*. They record a similar happening:

Quant femme a son cueur ahurté
 Il n'est riens qui luy desconseille,
 Et combat pour champ et cité,
 Demandez a ceulx de Marseille.

The very long *Champion des Dames* (24,024 lines) has only recently been edited by Robert Deschaux. Book Four of the *Champion des Dames* is devoted in part to historical examples of women who have fought courageously—Semiramis, Penthesilea, Talestris and others including Deborah, Jaël and Judith. The reference to the women of Marseilles is the only one we have so far found outside our own text. According to Deschaux' footnote, the city was besieged and taken by Alfonso V of Spain in 1423 though the standard histories make no mention of women in the siege.

There are other examples, all later, of women coming to the defence of their city. One of the better-known stories concerns the city of Beauvais which was besieged in 1472 by Charles of Burgundy. It was the women of the city who fought to defend it for Louis XI of France. Their leader was Jeanne Laisné, also known as Jeanne Hachette because she used such a weapon. She was rewarded, according to some, with a handsome dowry and tax exemptions; others note that the women of Beauvais were henceforth permitted to ride ahead of the men in city parades.¹³ One story from the sixteenth century also involves Marseilles and a troop of women led by Améliane du Puget. When the assailants of the city laid mines, Améliane and her women laid counter-mines, digging a trench that was long known as the Tranchée des Dames, and in modern times became the Boulevard des Dames.¹⁴ There are a number of others, including some *finesses* Jeanne d'Arc.¹⁵

The example of Jeanne d'Arc is one that does not occur in our poem, which may provide a clue to its date of composition, though the material evidence in the manuscript suggests this copy of the poem is later than the period of Jeanne d'Arc's famous exploits in 1429-30. Our examination of the watermarks would place the manuscript at least around 1440 or later, though the poem itself may have been composed earlier.

Our poem returns to more common material for its ending, admonishing those men who would demean women. To recount the number of stories of brave women from the past would be as difficult as using a sieve to catch the air:

¶Si est foul qui femme diffamme, (433r)
 quar homs ne peut gaires sans femme,
 ne n'est riens qui tant plaise a homme
 comme femme, c'est tout en somme. 236

The poem is unusual in that it seems to incorporate some of the stories found in the “Querelle du Roman de la Rose,” but there is a total absence of allegorical figures, merely the historical, and a framework that recalls the simpler defences of women we have mentioned. This is then a poem of quite special interest. Women are held here in high regard and seen in a positive and fighting light and not as the “weaker sex” or as the instrument of malicious forces.

Significantly, this poem is not central to the manuscript in which it is found; its existence reminds us that there are still texts of worth to be found if one looks beyond the immediate target. If research means to look again, this then is one of the delightful finds of the research enterprise.

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Notes

1 “Il n’i a lange ke put parler...Words against Women,” *Medium Aevum* 40 (1971): 6-9.

2 Brian Merrilees, ed., *Anglo-Norman Text Society* 20 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

3 *Patrologia Latina* v. 23, S. Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis Presbyteri Adversus Jovinianum Libri Duo, col. 0205-col. 0338A.

4 Ed. A.G. Rigg (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986).

5 *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 93 (1992): 221-234.

6 Prudence Mary O'Hara Tobin, *Les lais anonymes des XIIIe et XIIIe siècles: édition critique de quelques lais bretons* (Geneva: Droz, 1976), pp. 157-205.

7 (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1989).

8 Ed. Paul Meyer, “Mélanges de poésie française: Plaidoyer en faveur des femmes dans Romania,” 6 (1877): 499-503, esp. 501-503; another copy is found in

Paris, Arsenal 5201, ed. Jacob Ulrich, Robert von Blois *Sämmtliche Werke* 3 vols (Berlin, 1889-1895) III: 2-54.

9 Cambridge, University Library MS GG. I. 1; Cambridge, St John's College G 5 (noted in the colophon as the "Comendacion des Dames"), ed. Paul Meyer, "Les manuscrits français de Cambridge. II. Bibliothèque de l'Université," *Romania* 15 (1886): 237-357, esp. 315-321 (C.U.L. text) and *Romania* 8 (1879): 305-342, esp. 334 (St John's College text).

10 *Romania* 82 (1961): 458-481; 83 (1962): 30-51.

11 Martin Le Franc, *Le Champion des dames*, ed. Robert Deschaux (Paris: H. Champion, 1999).

12 The Latin definitional material in the dictionary itself owes most to the remarkable *Catholicon* of Johannes Balbus, a work which dominated medieval European lexicography in the Middle Ages, but our text draws also on such works as Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De proprietatibus rerum*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, Gratian's *Decretals* and others. The text thus has an encyclopedic as well as a lexicographical character.

13 Jessica Amanda Salmonson, *The Encyclopedia of Amazons: women warriors from antiquity to the modern era* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), p. 133.

14 Salmonson, *Encyclopedia*, p. 11. See also Jeanne de Montfort (fl 1342), pp.131-132.

15 Anne Echols and Marty Williams, *An Annotated Index of Medieval Women* (New York: M. Wiener; Oxford: Berg, c1992), p. 119; Francis Gribble, *Women in War* (London: S. Low, 1916), ch. xii.