

The Ladies' Complaint⁸⁰

Blessed are you, reader, if you do not belong to the sex of those who are precluded from all blessings and are deprived of their freedom, and who are even deprived of almost all virtues by being excluded from public duties, offices, and functions—in a word, if you are not deprived of the power by the moderate exercise of which most virtues are acquired, so that ignorance, slavery, and the capacity to play the fool are established as women's only happiness (if they like that game) and as their supreme and only virtues.⁸¹ Blessed are you, a second time, who can be wise without guilt, since your masculinity allows you—to the same extent that all these things are forbidden to women—every well-meaning action, every noble judgement, and every expression of exquisite speculation. But, while remaining silent temporarily about the other complaints of our sex, I ask you: how unjust is the way in which women are usually treated in conversations, insofar as they are included in them at all? I am so little (or, more accurately, so greatly) satisfied with my own situation that I am not afraid to admit that I know this from my own personal experience. If women possessed the reasoning and thoughts of Carneades,⁸² there is no man, no matter how puny he may be, who would not put them in their place with the approval of most of their company when, with merely a smile or a slight nod of the head, his silent eloquence would communicate: 'It's only a woman speaking.'

⁸⁰ *La Crief des dames* (Paris: Jean Libert, 1626). See Note on the Texts and Translations, and note 2 above about the term *dame* in French.

⁸¹ This sentence has sarcastic connotations of the paradoxical beatitudes in Matt. 5: 3–10; e.g. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Those who are deprived of all goods (*biens*) are described as 'blessed' (*bienheureux*).

⁸² Carneades (214–129/8 BC), born in Cyrene (North Africa) went to Athens and became head of the academy founded by Plato. He was renowned for his skill in argument. Cf. *Isaacs*, I, 26, 164C; *Essays*, 'On Educating Children,' 184: 'And how many men have I known in my time made as stupid as beasts by an indiscreet hunger for knowledge! Carneades was turned so mad by it that he could not find time to tend to his hair or his nails.'

Such a man rejects objections of every kind that women could make against the decrees of his judgement, no matter how discreetly they are made, as merely bitter prickliness or at least as stubbornness, either because he does not believe that they could strike his precious head with any response apart from that of bitterness or obstinacy, or because he feels in the depths of his heart that he is poorly prepared for combat and has to pretend that it is a trivial quarrel in order to avoid the blows that might strike him. Is that not too stupid a strategy to rely on, namely, to avoid engagement with certain minds that one may find difficult to defeat by reasoning?

Another man who is stopped in his tracks by his own feebleness and pretends that he would not wish to disturb anyone who dresses like us will be declared both victorious and courteous at the same time. Another still, despite accepting that a woman is capable of participating in a debate, thinks that his sense of propriety prevents him from engaging in a fair contest with a female mind, because he borrows his understanding of propriety from what is commonly believed—which is to despise women in this respect. When all is said and done, there is a big difference between leading some common person by the nose and being vain about the fact that they lead us by the nose!

Let us continue. This vulgar man, uttering many silly remarks, will always win the contest either because he has a beard or displays a proud simulated ability that he and his companions measure according to what is fashionable or useful, without realizing that his silly remarks occur to him quite often because he is more of a buffoon or flatterer than his companions, or because they result from cowardly submission, some other vice, or from the good grace and favour of someone who would not grant a place in their affections or their company to people who are more capable than himself.

The first kind of man mentioned above will be struck, because he lacks the intelligence required to recognize a blow delivered by a female hand. The second one mentioned recognizes the blow and feels it; then, in order to evade it, he turns the discourse into either a joke or a whirlwind of incessant cackling. Alternatively, he unravels it and diverts it in some other direction, and begins to spew out pedantically many learned things that no one asked him about or, by means of this ostentation, confuses and complicates the discussion with logical tricks while believing that flashes of learning, if scattered willy-nilly in every direction, will be enough to confuse his opponent.

These people know that, by acting in that way, it is easy to deceive bystanders who cannot decide if such displays of gallantry amount to victory or defeat, since they can very rarely judge the structure and content of a conversation and the relative strength of those engaged in it. They are also

very seldom capable of not succumbing to the effect of the pseudo-science that presumptuous vanity spews out as if it were an exercise in reciting one's homework for school. Thus, to win the argument, it is enough for these men to dodge the challenge, and their gain in glory is proportionate to their wish to avoid the effort involved in a genuine contest. Let these few words suffice about conversation, insofar as the participation of ladies is concerned; for, in relation to the art of conversation in general and its defects and perfections, the *Essays* provide an excellent treatment of that.⁸³

Let us notice, in this discourse, that it is not only those who are uneducated who stumble at this hurdle against the female sex. Even among those, living or dead, who have acquired a reputation for learning in our own day—sometimes, I would say, while clothed in official robes—there are some who have been known to despise completely the writings of women without deigning to take the trouble to read them and get acquainted with their content, without accepting any advice or suggestions they might find in such readings and, above all, without wishing to know if they themselves could produce something that all kinds of women would find worth reading. That makes me suspect that, even when they read men's writings, they perceive the shape of their authors' beards better than the structure of their arguments.

These expressions of contempt from teachers with moustaches are truly very convenient, according to popular opinion, for highlighting the lustre of their wisdom because, if a man is to win the esteem of the common people—that many-headed monster—especially at the Court, all he needs to do is despise one person after another and to swear that, in his own estimation, he is the best in the world,⁸⁴ just like that unfortunate woman who thought she could make herself a model of beauty by going about the streets of Paris, crying out with her hands on her hips: 'Come and see how beautiful I am.'

I would wish, however, in keeping with the demands of charity, that these people would add only one more mark of subtlety to the one just mentioned, by showing us that their intellectual ability always surpasses that of the female sex, when they are compared one to one, or alternatively—as a second best option—that it is equal to that of their neighbours, even those neighbours, I say, who are less than outstanding. As a result, among

⁸³ *Essais*, III: 8, 922B: *Essays*, 'On the Art of Conversation', 1045: 'To my taste the most fruitful and most natural exercise of our minds is conversation. I find the practice of it the most delightful activity in our lives.'

⁸⁴ *Essais*, I: 36, 756A; *Essays*, 'On the most excellent men', 855–6: 'to be the first among the Greeks is to be easily the best in the world.'

the lists of those of their ilk who dare to write, we would not read appalling translations when they dabble in translating some worthwhile author, or feeble and infantile ideas if they get involved in lecturing. We would avoid frequent contradictions, innumerable lapses, and a judgement that is blind to choice and to the succession of things, in works whose only seasoning is a light linguistic dressing on top of stolen material, like whipped egg whites.

In this context, I stumbled the other day on a prefatory letter by a well-known person among those who claim never to bother reading anything that is written by a woman. Good God! What gems, what glory, what oriental treasure, what splendour, what a gift from Palestine recovered from a hundred leagues beyond Mount Lebanon! Good God! What crawl-marks of flies, masquerading as phoenixes in the opinion of their authors! How far removed from genuine stylistic embellishments are those who look for them in excessive and ostentatious verbosity, especially in prose! 'Those to whom nature has given a skinny body,' according to a man of great merit, 'pad it out with stuffing; and those whose imaginations conceive of dry or insignificant material expand them with words.'⁸⁵ Besides, what a shame that France evaluates the merit of writers with such defective vision and dubious criteria that it has bestowed a reputation for excellent writing on an author, such as the author of this letter, who has never had any quality to recommend him other than a cosmetic camouflage, assisted by a bit of scholastic learning. I am inclined not to name him out of respect for the dead.⁸⁶

Finally, to return to the charitable attitude of wishing my neighbour well, I would also hope that any member of that swarm of writers or intellectuals, who despise the unfortunate and much criticized female sex, would cease using the services of printing companies and thereby at least leave us in doubt about whether or not they are capable of writing a book. For they show that they are incapable of doing so when they enhance their own writings by exploiting the labour of others—enhancing them, I say, in matters of detail and sometimes even in their totality, so that the respectable man whom the *Essays* mocked for the same vice, when their author was still alive, will not end up as the only example of this practice.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ This is a loose quotation from *Essais*, I: 26, 157C; *Essays*, 'On Educating Children', 176: 'People whose bodies are too thin pad them out; those whose matter is too slender pad it out too, with words.'

⁸⁶ The anonymous author remains unidentified.

⁸⁷ In the *Essais* I: 26, 151B; *Essays*, 'On Educating Children', 170, Montaigne wrote about meeting, in Pisa, 'a decent man who is such an Aristotelian that the most basic of his doctrines is that the touchstone and the measuring-scale of all sound ideas and of each and every truth

If I deigned to bother defending ladies against these learned men, I would have found supporters quickly in Socrates, Plato, Plutarch, Seneca, Antisthenes, or also in Saint Basil, Saint Jerome, and such minds, whom they so freely deny and reject when they establish a disjunction—especially a universal distinction—between the merits and capacities of the two sexes.⁸⁸ But they are adequately conquered and penalized for displaying their stupidity when they refute the particular by the general⁸⁹—if one could assume that, in general the ability of women is inferior. They also display their stupidity in the audacity of despising the judgement of such famous people as those mentioned above (apart from some modern authors), and the eternal decree of God Himself, who produced no more than a single creation of two sexes and who, moreover, honours women in His sacred history with all the gifts and graces that he shares with men, as I have argued more fully in the *Equality of Men and Women*.

Besides, men like that should surely be willing to be informed that we do not know if they are capable of defeating women by the sovereign law of their own arbitrary choice, which condemns women and restricts them to inadequacy, or whether they can achieve any glory in their attempts to erase women by their scorn, from which they draw their weapons with such self-satisfaction. But we know some women who would never seek glory in something as insignificant as erasing men, either in the same way [as men behave, by scorn] or by comparing themselves with men. Furthermore, they will know that, by relying on the same subtlety with which men try to scorn women without listening to them or reading their writings, women in contrast will aim to win the battle because they have heard what men have said and will have read what they wrote. They will also manage to remember a dangerous maxim that has a very good pedigree: that only the most inept are content with their own ability while glancing over their shoulder at the ability of others, and that ignorance is the mother of presumption.

lie in their conformity with the teachings of Aristotle, outside of which all is mere and chimerical.' The author in question was Girolamo Borro, who published on various topics in Aristotelian natural philosophy, including the tides and gravity: *Del flusso e reflusso del mare & dell'inondatione del Nilo* (Florence, 1577), and *Il motu gravium et levium* (Florence, 1575).

For Antisthenes, see note 27 above.

⁸⁹ Gournay assumes the standard epistemic account of the relation between universal and particular knowledge—claim that we know the truth-value of propositions about individuals first, by experience, and that universal propositions are known only by induction from particular cases. It would be a fundamental mistake, therefore, to assume that we know the truth of universal claims about women independently, and to use those universal claims to refute the very evidence on which they are based, namely, evidence about particulars.