THE OTHER VOICE
IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE:
INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES
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THE OLD VOICE AND THE OTHER VOICE

In western Europe and the United States women are nearing equality in the professions, in business, and in politics. Most enjoy access to education, reproductive rights, and autonomy in financial affairs. Issues vital to women are on the public agenda: equal pay, child care, domestic abuse, breast cancer research, and curricular revision with an eye to the inclusion of women.

These recent achievements have their origins in things women (and some male supporters) said for the first time about six hundred years ago. Theirs is the “other voice,” in contradistinction to the “first voice,” the voice of the educated men who created Western culture. Coincident with a general reshaping of European culture in the period 1300–1700 (called the Renaissance or early modern period), questions of female equality and opportunity were raised that still resound and are still unresolved.

The “other voice” emerged against the backdrop of a three-thousand-year history of the derogation of women rooted in the civilizations related to Western culture: Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Christian. Negative attitudes toward women inherited from these traditions pervaded the intellectual, medical, legal, religious, and social systems that developed during the European Middle Ages.

The following pages describe the traditional, overwhelmingly male views of women’s nature inherited by early modern Europeans, and the new tradition that the “other voice” called into being to challenge reigning assumptions. This review should serve as a framework for understanding the texts published in the series “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.” Introductions specific to each text and author follow this essay in all the volumes of the series.
Traditional views of women, 500 B.C.E.-1500 C.E.

Embedded in the philosophical and medical theories of the ancient Greeks were perceptions of the female as inferior to the male in both mind and body. Similarly, the structure of civil legislation inherited from the ancient Romans was biased against women, and the views on women developed by Christian thinkers out of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament were negative and disabling. Literary works composed in the vernacular of ordinary people, and widely recited or read, conveyed these negative assumptions. The social networks within which most women lived—those of the family and the institutions of the Roman Catholic Church—were shaped by this negative tradition and sharply limited the areas in which women might act and upon the world.

Greek philosophy and female nature. Greek biology assumed that women were inferior to men and defined them as merely as childbearers and housekeepers. This view was authoritative expressed in the works of the philosopher Aristotle.

Aristotle thought in dualities. He considered action superior to inaction, form (the inner design or structure of any object) superior to matter, completion to incompleteness, possession to deprivation. In each of these dualities he associated the male principle with the superior quality and the female with the inferior. “The male principle in nature,” he argued, “is associated with active, formative and perfected characteristics, while the female is passive, material and deprived, desiring the male in order to become complete.”

Men are always identified with virile qualities, such as judgment, courage, and stamina, and women with their opposites—irrationality, cowardice, and weakness.

The masculine principle was considered to be superior even in the womb. The man’s semen, Aristotle believed, created the form of a new human creature, while the female body contributed only matter. (The existence of the ovum, and the other facts of human embryology, was not established until the seventeenth century.) Although the later Greek physician Galen believed there was a female component in generation, contributed by “female semen,” the followers of both Aristotle and Galen saw the male role in human generation as more active and more important.

In the Aristotelian view, the male principle sought to reproduce itself. The creation of a female was always a mistake, therefore, resulting from an imperfect act of generation. Every female born was considered a “defective” or “mutilated” male (as Aristotle’s terminology has variously been translated), a “monstrosity” of nature.

For Greek theorists, the biology of males and females was the key to their psychology. The female was softer and more docile, more apt to be despise, querulous, and deceitful. Being incomplete, moreover, she craved sexual fulfillment in intercourse with a male. The male was intellectual, active, and in control of his passions.

These psychological polarities derived from the theory that the universe consisted of four elements (earth, fire, air, and water), expressed in human bodies as four “humors” (black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm) considered respectively dry, hot, damp, and cold, and corresponding to mental states (“melancholic,” “choleric,” “sanguine,” “phlegmatic”). In this scheme, the male, sharing the principles of earth and fire, was dry and hot; the female, sharing the principles of air and water, was damp and cold.

Woman’s psychology was further affected by her dominant organ, the uterus (womb), 


2. Aristotle, Generation of Animals 2.3 737a27-28 (Barnes, 1.1144).
her children upon her death. When her husband died the household property passed not to her but to his male heirs. And when her father died she had no claim to any family inheritance, which was directed to her brothers or more remote male relatives. The effect of these laws was to exclude women from civil society, itself based on property ownership.

In the later republican and imperial periods these rules were significantly modified, and women rarely married according to the traditional form. The practice of “free” marriage allowed a woman to remain under her father’s authority, to possess property given her by her father (most frequently the “dowry,” recoverable from the husband’s household on his death), and to inherit from her father. She could also bequeath property to her own children and divorce her husband, just as he could divorce her.

Despite this greater freedom, women still suffered enormous disability under Roman law. Heirs could belong only to the father’s side, never the mother’s. Moreover, although she could bequeath her property to her children, she could not establish a line of succession in doing so. A woman was “the beginning and end of her own family,” said the jurist Ulpian. Moreover, women could play no public role. They could not hold public office, represent anyone in a legal case, or even witness a will. Women had only a private existence and no public personality.

The dowry system, the guardian, women’s limited ability to transmit wealth, and their total political disability are all features of Roman law adopted by the medieval communities of western Europe, although modified according to local customary laws.

Christian doctrine and women’s place. The Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament authorized later writers to limit women to the realm of the family and to burden them with the guilt of original sin. The passages most fruitful for this purpose were the creation narratives in Genesis and sentences from the Epistles defining women’s role within the Christian family and community.

Each of the first two chapters of Genesis contains a creation narrative. In the first “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). In the second, God created Eve from Adam’s rib (2:21–23). Christian theologians relied principally on Genesis 2 for their understanding of the relationship between man and woman, interpreting the creation of Eve from Adam as proof of her subordination to him.

The creation story in Genesis 2 leads to that of the temptations in Genesis 3 of Eve by the wily serpent and of Adam by Eve. As read by Christian theologians from Tertullian to Thomas Aquinas, the narrative made Eve
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responsible for the Fall and its consequences. She instigated the act; she deceived her husband; she suffered the greater punishment. Her disobedience made it necessary for Jesus to be incarnated and to die on the cross. From the pulpit, moralists and preachers for centuries convened to women the guilt they bore for original sin.

The Epistles offered advice to early Christians on building communities of the faithful. Among the matters to be regulated was the place of women. Paul offered views favorable to women in Gal 3:28. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul also referred to women as his co-workers and placed them on a par with himself and his male co-workers (Phil 4:2–3; Rom 16:1–3, 1 Cor. 16:19). Elsewhere Paul limited women’s possibilities: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3).

Biblical passages by later writers (though attributed to Paul) enjoined women to forgo jewels, expensive clothes, and elaborate coiffures, and they forbade women to “teach or have authority over men,” telling them to “learn in silence with all submissiveness” as is proper for one responsible for sin, consoling them however with the thought that they will be saved through childbearing (1 Tim. 2:9–15). Other texts among the later Epistles defined women as the weaker sex and emphasized their subordination to their husbands (1 Peter 3:7, Col. 3:18, Eph. 5:22–23).

These passages from the New Testament became the arsenal employed by theologians of the early church to transmit negative attitudes toward women to medieval Christian culture—above all, Tertullian (“On the Apparel of Women”), Jerome (“Against Jovinian”), and Augustine (“The Literal Meaning of Genesis”).

The Image of Women in Medieval Literature. The philosophical, legal, and religious traditions born in antiquity formed the basis of the medieval intellectual synthesis wrought by trained thinkers, mostly clerics, writing in Latin and based largely in universities. The vernacular literary tradition that developed alongside the learned tradition also spoke about female nature and women’s roles. Medieval stories, poems, and epics also portrayed women negatively—as lustful and deceitful—while praising good housekeepers and loyal wives as replicas of the Virgin Mary or the female saints and martyrs.

There is an exception in the movement of “courtly love” that evolved in southern France from the twelfth century. Courtly love was erotic love between a nobleman and noblewoman, the latter usually superior in social rank. It was always adulterous. From the conventions of courtly love derive modern Western notions of romantic love. The tradition has had an impact disproportionate to its size, for it affected only a tiny elite, and very few women. The exaltation of the female lover probably does not reflect a higher evaluation of women, or a step toward their sexual liberation. More likely it gives expression to the social and sexual tensions besetting the knighthood class at a specific historical juncture.

The literary fashion of courtly love was on the wane by the thirteenth century, when the widely read Romance of the Rose was composed in French by two authors of significantly different dispositions. Guillaume de Lorris composed the initial four thousand verses about 1235, and Jean de Meun added about seventeen thousand verses—more than four times the original—about 1265.

The fragment composed by Guillaume de Lorris stands squarely in the tradition of courtly love. Here the poet, in a dream, is admitted into a walled garden where he finds a magic fountain in which a rose bush is reflected. He longs to pick one rose, but the thorns prevent it, even as he is wounded by arrows from the god of love, whose commands he agrees to obey. The rest of this part of the poem recounts the poet’s unsuccessful efforts to pluck the rose.

The longer part of the Romance by Jean de Meun also describes a dream. But here allegorical characters give long didactic speeches, providing a social satire on a variety of themes, some pertaining to women. Love is an anxious and tormented state, the poem explains; women are greedy and manipulative, marriage is miserable, beautiful women are lustful, ugly ones cease to please, and a chaste woman is as rare as a black swan.

Shortly after Jean de Meun completed The Romance of the Rose, Matheolus penned his Lamentations, a long Latin diatribe against marriage translated into French about a century later. The Lamentations summed up medieval attitudes toward women and provoked the important response by Christine de Pisan in her Book of the City of Ladies.

In 1355 Giovanni Boccaccio wrote Il Corbaccio, another antifeminist manifesto, though ironically by an author whose other works pioneered new directions in Renaissance thought. The former husband of his lover appears to Boccaccio, condemning his unmoderated lust and detailing the defects of women. Boccaccio concedes at the end “how much men naturally surpass women in nobility” and is cured of his desires.

women's roles in the family. The negative perception of women expressed in the intellectual tradition is also implicit in the actual roles women played in European society. Assigned to subordinate positions in the household and the church, they were barred from significant participation in public life.

Medieval European households, like those in antiquity and in non-Western civilizations, were headed by males. It was the male serf, peasant, feudal lord, town merchant, or citizen who was policed or taxed or who succeeded in an inheritance or had any acknowledged public role, although his wife or widow could stand as a temporary surrogate for him. From about 1100, the position of property-holding males was further enhanced. Inheritance was confined to the male, or agnate, line—with depressing consequences for women.

A wife never fully belonged to her husband's family nor a daughter to her father's. She left her father's house young to marry whomever her parents chose. Her dowry was managed by her husband, and at her death it normally passed to her children by him.

A married woman's life was occupied nearly constantly with cycles of pregnancy, childbearing, and lactation. Women bore children through all the years of their fertility, and many died in childbirth. They also were responsible for raising young children up to six or seven. In the proprietor classes that responsibility was shared, since it was common for a wet nurse to take over breast-feeding, and servants performed other chores.

Women trained their daughters in the household duties appropriate to their status, nearly always tasks associated with textiles: spinning, weaving, sewing, embroidering. Their sons were sent out of the house as apprentices or students, or their fathers assumed their training in later childhood and adolescence. On the death of her husband, a woman's children became the responsibility of his family. She generally did not take "his" children with her to a new marriage or back to her father's house, except sometimes in artisan classes.

Women also worked. Peasants performed farm chores, merchant wives often practiced their husbands' trades, the unmarried daughters of the urban poor worked as servants or prostitutes. All wives produced or embellished textiles and did the housekeeping, and wealthy ones managed servants. These labors were unpaid or poorly paid but often contributed substantially to family wealth.

Women's roles: the church. Membership in a household, whether a father's or a husband's, meant for women a lifelong subordination to others. In Western Europe the Roman Catholic Church offered an alternative to the career of wife and mother. A woman could enter a convent parallel in function to the monasteries for men that evolved in the early Christian centuries.

In the convent, a woman pledged herself to a celibate life, lived according to strict community rules, and worshiped daily. Often the convent offered training in Latin, allowing some women to become considerable scholars and authors as well as scribes, artists, and musicians. For women who chose the conventual life the benefits could be enormous, but for numerous others placed in convents by paternal choice, the life could be restrictive and burdensome.

The conventual life declined as an alternative for women as the modern age approached. Reformed monastic institutions resisted responsibility for related female orders. The church increasingly restricted female institutional life by insisting on closer male supervision.

Women often sought other options. Some joined the communities of laywomen that sprang up spontaneously in the thirteenth century in the urban zones of Western Europe, especially in Flanders and Italy. Some joined the heretical movements that flourished in late medieval Christendom, whose anticalerical and often anti-family positions particularly appealed to women. In these communities, some women were acclaimed as "holy women" or "saints," whereas others were often condemned as frauds or heretics.

Though the options offered to women by the church were sometimes less than satisfactory, they were sometimes richly rewarding. After 1520 the convent remained an option only in Roman Catholic territories. Protestantism engendered an ideal of marriage as a heroic endeavor and appeared to place husband and wife on a more equal footing. Sermons and treatises, however, still called for female subordination and obedience.

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe

When the modern era opened, European culture was so firmly structured by a framework of negative attitudes toward women that to dismantle it was a monumental labor. The process began as part of a larger cultural movement that entailed the critical reexamination of ideas inherited from the ancient and medieval past. The humanists launched that critical reexamination.

The humanist foundation. Originating in Italy in the fourteenth century, humanism quickly became the dominant intellectual movement in Europe. Spreading in the sixteenth century from Italy to the rest of Europe, it fueled the literary, scientific, and philosophical movements of the era and laid the basis for the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Humanists regarded the Scholastic philosophy of medieval universities
women; works arguing for the equal education of men and women; works defining and redefining women’s proper role in the family, at court, and in public; works describing women’s lives and experiences. Recent monographs and articles have begun to hint at the great range of this movement, involving probably several thousand titles. The protofeminism of these “other voices” constitutes a significant fraction of the literary product of the early modern era.

THE CATALOGS. About 1365, the same Boccaccio whose Corbaccio rehearses the usual charges against female nature wrote another work, Concerning Famous Women. A humanist treatise drawing on classical texts, it praised 106 notable women from pagan Greek and Roman antiquity, from the Bible (Eve), and from the medieval religious and cultural tradition; his book helped make all readers aware of a sex normally condemned or forgotten. Boccaccio’s outlook nevertheless was unfriendly to women, for it singled out for praise those women who possessed the traditional virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience. Women who were active in the public realm—for example, rulers and warriors—were depicted as usally being lascivious and as suffering terrible punishments for entering the masculine sphere. Women were his subject, but Boccaccio’s standard remained male.

Christina de Pizan’s Book of the City of Ladies contains a second catalog, one responding specifically to Boccaccio’s. Where Boccaccio portrays female virtue as exceptional, she depicts it as universal. Many women in history were leaders, or remained chaste despite the lascivious approaches of men, or were visionaries and brave martyrs.

The work of Boccaccio inspired a series of catalogs of illustrious women of the biblical, classical, Christian, and local pasts, among them Filippo da Bergamo’s Of Illustrious Women, Pierre de Barrantes Lives of Illustrious Women, Pieter Le Moyne’s Gallerie of Heroic Women, and Pietro Paolo de Riber’s Immortal Triumphs and Heroic Enterprises of 815 Women. Whatever their embedded prejudices, these works drove home to the public the possibility of female excellence.

THE DEBATE. Yet many questions remained: Could a woman be virtuous? Could she perform noteworthy deeds? Was she even, strictly speaking, of the same human species as men? These questions were debated over four centuries, in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English, by authors male and female, among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, in ponderous volumes and breezy pamphlets. The whole literary genre has been called the querelle des femmes, the “woman question.”

The opening volley of this battle occurred in the first years of the fifteenth century, in a literary debate sparked by Christine de Pizan. She
Exchanged letters critical of Jean de Meun's contribution to The Romance of the Rose with two French royal secretaries, Jean de Montreuil and Gontier Col. When the matter became public, Jean Gerson, one of Europe's leading theologians, supported her arguments against Jean de Meun, for the moment silencing the opposition.

The debate surfaced repeatedly over the next two hundred years. The Triumph of Women (1438) by Juan Rodríguez de la Camara (or Juan Rodríguez del Padron) struck a new note by presenting arguments for the superiority of women to men. The Champion of Women (1440–42) by Martin Le Franc addresses once again the negative views of women presented in The Romance of the Rose, and offers counter-evidence of female virtue and achievement.

A cameo of the debate on women is included in The Courtoir, one of the most widely read books of the era, published by the Italian Baldassare Castiglione in 1528 and immediately translated into other European languages. The Courtoir depicts a series of evenings at the court of the duke of Urbino in which many men and some women of the highest social stratum amuse themselves by discussing a range of literary and social issues. The "woman question" is a pervasive theme throughout, and the third of its four books is devoted entirely to that issue.

In a verbal duel, Gasparo Pallavicino and Giuliano de' Medici present the main claims of the two traditions. Gasparo argues the innate inferiority of women and their inclination to vice. Only in bearing children do they profit the world. Giuliano counters that women share the same spiritual and mental capacities as men and may excel in wisdom and action. Men and women are of the same essence; just as no stone can be more perfectly a stone than another, so no human being can be more perfectly human than others, whether male or female. It was an astonishing assertion, boldly made to an audience as large as all Europe.

The Treatises. Humanism provided the materials for a positive counter-concept to the misogyny embodied in Scholastic philosophy and law and inherited from the Greek, Roman, and Christian pasts. A series of humanist treatises on marriage and family, education and deportment, and the nature of women helped construct these new perspectives.

The works by Francesco Barbaro and Leon Battista Alberti, respectively On Marriage (1415) and On the Family (1434–37), far from defending female equality, reassessed women's responsibility for rearing children and managing the household while being obedient, chaste, and silent. Nevertheless, they served the cause of reexamining the issue of women's nature by placing domestic issues at the center of scholarly concern and reopening the permanent classical texts. In addition, Barbaro emphasized the companionate nature of marriage and the importance of a wife's spiritual and mental qualities for the well-being of the family.

These themes reappear in later humanist works on marriage and the education of women by Juan Luis Vives and Erasmus. Both were moderately sympathetic to the condition of women without reaching beyond the usual masculine prescriptions for female behavior.

An outlook more favorable to women characterizes the nearly unknown work In Praise of Women (ca. 1487) by the Italian humanist Bartolomeo Goggi. In addition to providing a catalog of illustrious women, Goggi argued that male and female are the same in essence, but that women (reworking the Adam and Eve narrative) are actually superior. In the same vein, the Italian humanist Maria Eulicia asserted the spiritual equality of men and women in On Women (1501). In 1525 Caleazzo Flavio Capra (or Capella) published his work On the Excellence and Dignity of Women. This humanist tradition of treatises defending the worthiness of women culminates in the work of Henricus Cornelius Agrippa On the Nobility and Prowess of the Female Sex. No work by a male humanist more succinctly or explicitly presents the case for female dignity.

The Witch Books. While humanists grappled with the issues pertaining to women and family, other learned men turned their attention to what they perceived as a very great problem: witches. Witch-hunting manuals, explorations of the witch phenomenon, and even defenses of witches are not at first glance pertinent to the tradition of the other voice. But they do relate in this way: most accused witches were women. The hostility aroused by supposed witch activity is comparable to the hostility aroused by women. The evil deeds the victims of the hunt were charged with were exaggerations of the vices to which, many believed, all women were prone.

The connection between the witch accusation and the hatred of women is explicit in the notorious witch-hunting manual The Hammer of Witches (1486), by two Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger. Here the inconstancy, deceitfulness, and lust traditionally associated with women are depicted in exaggerated form as the core features of witch behavior. These inclined women to make a bargain with the devil—sealed by sexual intercourse—by which they acquired unholy powers. Such bizarre claims, far from being rejected by rational men, were broadcast by intellectuals. The German Ulrich Molitor, the Frenchman Nicolas Remy, and the Italian Stefano Guazzo cooly informed the public of sinister orgies and midnight pacts with the devil. The celebrated French jurist,
Historian and political philosopher Jean Bodin argued that because women were especially prone to diabolism, regular legal procedures could properly be suspended in order to try those accused of this "exceptional crime."

A few experts, such as the physician Johann Weyer, a student of Agrippa's, raised their voices in protest. In 1563 Weyer explained the witch phenomenon thus, without discarding belief in diabolism: the devil defiled foolish old women affected by melancholia, causing them to believe they had magical powers. His rational skepticism, which had good credibility in the community of the learned, worked to revise the conventional views of women and witchcraft.

WOMEN'S WORKS. To the many categories of works produced on the question of women's worth must be added nearly all works written by women. A woman writing was in herself a statement of women's claim to dignity.

Only a few women wrote anything before the dawn of the modern era, for three reasons. First, they rarely received the education that would enable them to write. Second, they were not admitted to the public roles—as administrator, bureaucrat, lawyer or notary, university professor—in which they might gain knowledge of the kinds of things the literate public thought worth writing about. Third, the culture imposed silence upon women, considering speaking out a form of unchastity. Given these conditions, it is remarkable that any women wrote. Those who did so before the fourteenth century were almost always nuns or religious women whose isolation made their pronouncements more acceptable.

From the fourteenth century on, the volume of women's writings rose. Women continued to write devotional literature, although not always as cloistered nuns. They also wrote diaries, often intended as keepsakes for their children; books of advice to their sons and daughters, letters to family members and friends; and family memoirs, in a few cases elaborate enough to be considered histories.

A few women wrote works directly concerning the "woman question," and some of these, such as the humanists Isotta Scogarola, Cassandra Fedele, Laura Cereta, and Olympia Morata, were highly trained. A few were professional writers, living by the income of their pens: the very first among them was Christine de Pizan, noteworthy in this context as in so many others. In addition to Book of the City of Ladies and her critiques of The Romance of the Rose, she wrote The Treasure of the City of Ladies (a guide to social decorum for women), an advice book for her son, much courtly verse, and a full-scale history of the reign of King Charles V of France.

WOMEN PATRONS. Women who did not themselves write but encour-aged others to do so boosted the development of an alternative tradition. Highly placed women patrons supported authors, artists, musicians, poets, and learned men. Such patrons, drawn mostly from the Italian elites and the courts of northern Europe, figure disproportionately as the deidicates of the important works of early feminism.

For a start, it might be noted that the catalogs of Boccaccio and Alvaro de Luna were dedicated to the Florentine noblewoman Andrea Acciaioli and to Doña María, first wife of King Juan II of Castile, while the French translation of Boccaccio's work was commissioned by Anne la Grande, wife of King Charles VIII of France. The humanist treatises of Coggiolo, Equivoque, Vives, and Agrippa were dedicated, respectively, to Eleonora of Aragon, wife of Ercole I d'Este, duke of Ferrara; to Margherita Cattelana of Mantua; to Catherine of Aragon, wife of King Henry VIII of England, and to Margaret, Duchess of Austria and regent of the Netherlands. As late as 1696, Mary Astell's Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest was dedicated to Princess Anne of Denmark.

These authors presumed that their efforts would be welcome to female patrons, or they may have written at the bidding of those patrons. Silent themselves, perhaps even unresponsive, these loftily placed women helped shape the tradition of the other voice.

THE ISSUES. The literary forms and patterns in which the tradition of the other voice presented itself have now been sketched. It remains to highlight the major issues around which this tradition crystallizes. In brief, there are four problems to which our authors return again and again, in plays and catalogs, in verse and letters, in treatises and dialogues, in every language: the problem of chastity, the problem of power, the problem of speech, and the problem of knowledge. Of these the greatest, preconditioning the others, is the problem of chastity.

THE PROBLEM OF CHASTITY. In traditional European culture, as in the cultures of antiquity and others around the globe, chastity was perceived as woman's quintessential virtue—in contrast to courage, or generosity, or leadership, or rationality, seen as virtues characteristic of men. Opponents of women charged them with insatiable lust: Women themselves and their defenders—without disputing the validity of the standard—responded that women were capable of chastity.

The requirement of chastity kept women at home, silenced them, isolated them, left them in ignorance. It was the source of all other impediments. Why was it so important to the society of men, of whom chastity was not required, and who more often than not considered it their right to violate the chastity of any woman they encountered?
Female chastity ensured the continuity of the male-headed household. If a man's wife was not chaste, he could not be sure of the legitimacy of his offspring. If children were not his acquired through marriage, it was not his household, but some other man's, that had endured. If his daughter was not chaste, she could not be transferred to another man's household as his wife, and he was dishonored.

The whole system of the integrity of the household and the transmission of property was bound up in female chastity. Such a requirement pertained only to property-owning classes, of course. Poor women could not expect to maintain their chastity, least of all if they were in contact with high-status men to whom all women but those of their own household were prey.

In Catholic Europe, the requirement of chastity was further buttressed by moral and religious imperatives. Original sin was inescapably linked with the sexual act. Virginity was seen as heroic virtue, far more impressive than, say, the avoidance of idleness or greed. Monasticism, the cultural institution that dominated medieval Europe for centuries, was grounded in the renunciation of the flesh. The Catholic reform of the eleventh century imposed a similar standard on all the clergy and a heightened awareness of sexual requirements on all the laity. Although men were asked to be chaste, female unchastity was much worse; it led to the devil, as Eve had led mankind to sin.

To such requirements, women and their defenders protested their innocence. Following the example of holy women who had escaped the requirements of family and sought the religious life, some women began to conceive of female communities as alternatives both to family and to the cloister. Christine de Pizan's City of Ladies was such a community. Moderata Fonte and Mary Astell envisioned others. The luxurious salons of the French précéuses of the seventeenth century, or the comfortable English drawing rooms of the next, may have been born of the same impulse. Here women not only might escape, if briefly, the subordinate position that life in the family entailed, but might make claims to power, exercise their capacity for speech, and display their knowledge.

**The Problem of Speech.** Just as power had a sexual dimension when it was claimed by women, so did speech. A good woman spoke little. Excessive speech was an indication of unchastity. By speech, women seduced men. Eve had lured Adam into sin by her speech. Accused witches were commonly accused of having spoken abusively, or irrationally, or simply too much. As enlightened a figure as Francesco Barbaro insisted on silence in a woman, which he linked to her perfect unanimity with her husband's will and her unblemished virtue (her chastity). Another Italian humanist, Leonardo Bruni, in advising a noblewoman on her studies, barred her not from speech, but from public speaking. That was reserved for men.

The association of such images with women who held or sought power explains some otherwise odd features of early modern culture. Queen Elizabeth I of England, one of the few women to hold full regal authority in European history, played with such male/female images—positive ones, of course—in representing herself to her subjects. She was a prince, and manly, even though she was female. She was also (she claimed) virginal, a condition absolutely essential if she was to avoid the attacks of her opponents. Catherine de' Medici, who ruled France as widow and as regent for her sons, also adopted such imagery in defining her position. She chose as one symbol the figure of Artemisia, an androgynous ancient warrior- heroine who combined a female persona with masculine powers.

Power in a woman, without such sexual imagery, seems to have been indigestible by the culture. A rare note was struck by the Englishman Sir Thomas Elvet in his _Defense of Good Women_ (1540), justifying both women's participation in civic life and their prowess in arms. The old tune was sung by the Scots reformer John Knox in his _First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women_ (1558), for him rule by women, defects in nature, was a hideous contradiction in terms.

The confused sexuality of the imagery of female potency was not reserved for rulers. Any woman who excelled was likely to be called an Amazon, recalling the self-mutilated warrior women of antiquity who repudiated all men, gave up their sons, and raised only their daughters. She was often said to have "exceeded her sex," or to have possessed "masculine virtue"—since the very fact of conspicuous excellence conferred masculinity even on the female subject. The catalogues of notable women often showed those female heroes dressed in armor and armed to the teeth, like men. Amazonian heroines roam through the epics of the age—Ariosto's _Orlando Furioso_ (1532), Spenser's _Faerie Queene_ (1590–1609). Excellence in a woman was perceived as a claim for power, and power was reserved for the masculine realm. A woman who possessed either was masculinized, and lost title to her own female identity.
Related to the problem of speech was that of costume, another, if silent, form of self-expression. Assigned the task of pleasing men as their primary occupation, elite women often tended toward elaborate costume, hairdressing, and the use of cosmetics. Clergy and secular moralists alike condemned these practices. The appropriate function of costume and adornment was to announce the status of a woman’s husband or father. Any further indulgence in adornment was akin to unchastity.

The Problem of Knowledge. When the Italian noblewoman Isotta Nogarola had begun to attain a reputation as a humanist, she was accused of incest—a telling instance of the association of learning in women with unchastity. That chilling association inclined any woman who was educated to deny that she was, or to make exaggerated claims of heroic chastity.

If educated women were pursued with suspicions of sexual misconduct, women seeking an education faced an even more daunting obstacle: the assumption that women were by nature incapable of learning, that reasoning was a particularly masculine ability. Just as they proclaimed their chastity, women and their defenders insisted upon their capacity for learning. The major work by a male writer on female education—The Education of a Christian Woman. A Sixteenth-Century Manual—granted female capacity for intellection but argued still that a woman’s whole education was to be shaped around the requirement of chastity and a future within the household. Female writers of the following generations—Marie de Gournay in France, Anna Maria van Schurman in Holland, Mary Astell in England—began to envision other possibilities.

The pioneers of female education were the Italian women humanists who managed to attain a literacy in Latin and a knowledge of classical and Christian literature equivalent to that of prominent men. Their works implicitly and explicitly raise questions about women’s social roles, defining problems that beset women attempting to break out of the cultural limits that had bound them. Like Christine de Pizan, who achieved an advanced education through her father’s tutoring and her own devices, their bold questioning makes clear the importance of training. Only when women were educated to the same standard as male leaders would they be able to raise that other voice and insist on their dignity as human beings morally, intellectually, and legally equal to men.

The Other Voice. The other voice, a voice of protest, was mostly female, but also male. It spoke in the vernaculars and in Latin, in treatises and dialogues, plays and poetry, letters and diaries, and pamphlets. It battered at the wall of prejudice that encircled women and raised a banner announcing its claims. The female was equal (or even superior) to the male in essential nature—moral, spiritual, intellectual. Women were capable of higher education, of holding positions of power and influence in the public realm, and of speaking and writing persuasively. The last bastion of masculine supremacy, centered on the notion of a woman’s primary domestic responsibility and the requirement of female chastity, had not as yet been assaulted—although visions of productive female communities as alternatives to the family indicated an awareness of the problem.

During the period 1300–1700, the other voice remained only a voice, and one dimly heard. It did not result—yet—in an alteration of social patterns. Indeed, to this day they have not been completely altered. Yet the call for justice issued as long as six centuries ago by those writing in the tradition of the other voice must be recognized as the source and origin of the mature feminist tradition and of the realignment of social institutions accomplished in the modern age.

We thank the volume editors in this series, who responded with many suggestions to an earlier draft of this introduction, making it a collaborative enterprise. Many of their recommendations and criticisms have resulted in revisions, though we remain responsible for the final product.

Projected Titles in the Series
Giuseppa Eleonora Barbapiccola and Diamante Medaglia Faini, The Education of Women, edited and translated by Paula Findlen and Rebecca Messbarger
Marie Dentiere. Prefaces, Epistles, and History of the Deliverance of Gnomon by the Protestants, edited and translated by Mary B. McKinley
Isabella d’Este. Selected Letters, edited and translated by Deanna Shemek
Cassandra Fedele. Letters and Orations, edited and translated by Diana Robin
Marie de Gournay. The Equality of Men and Women and Other Writings, edited and translated by Richard Hillman and Colette Quesnel
Annibale Guasco, Discussion with D. Avinio, His Daughter, concerning the Manner of Conducting Oneself at Court, edited and translated by Peggy Osborn
Olympia Morata. Complete Writings, edited and translated by Holt N. Parker
Isotta Nogarola, Selected Letters, edited by Margaret King and Albert Rabl Jr. and translated by Diana Robin, with an introduction by Margaret L. King
Christine de Pizan. Debate over the ‘Romance of the Rose’ edited and translated by Tom Conley
Francois Poullain de la Barre, The Equality of the Sexes and the Education of Women, edited and translated by Albert Rabl Jr
Olivia Sabucu, The New Philosophy True Medicine, edited and translated by Gianna Pomata