

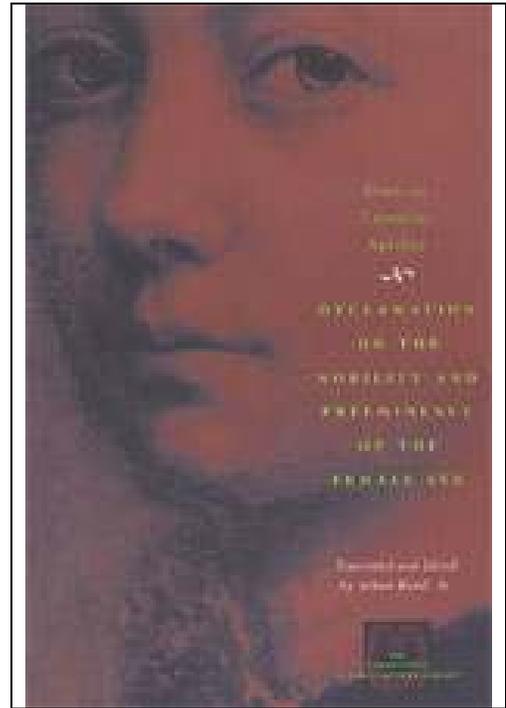
Henricus Cornelius Agrippa

Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex (1529)

Declamation is a book that pays homage to the moral, intellectual, and physical, not equality, but superiority of woman over man.

It argues that women are more than equal to men in all things that really matter, including the public spheres from which they had long been excluded.

Agrippa argued against the misogynistic interpretations of the female body in Greek medicine, in the Bible, in Roman and canon law, in theology and moral philosophy, and in politics. He raised the question of why women were excluded and provided answers based not on sex but on social conditioning, education, and the prejudices of their more powerful oppressors.



"So let me begin my subject at the beginning.

Woman was created as much superior to man as the name she has received is superior to his. For Adam means earth, but Eve is translated as life. And as far as life is to be ranked above earth, so far is woman to be ranked above man.

Again after all this he created two human beings in his image, man first, then woman, in whom the heavens and the earth, and every embellishment of both, are brought to perfection, For when the Creator came to the creation of woman, he rested himself in this creation, thinking that he had nothing more honorable to create; in her were completed and consummated all the wisdom and power of the Creator; after her no creation could be found or imagined. Since, therefore, woman is the ultimate end of creation, the most perfect accomplishment of all the works of God and the perfection of the universe itself, who will deny that she possesses honor surpassing every other creature? Without her the world itself, already perfect to a fault and complete at every level, would have been imperfect; it could only be perfected in the creature of all others by far the most perfect. For it is unreasonable and absurd to think that God would have finished so great a work with something imperfect.

Since the world itself has been created by God as a circle of absolute perfection, it is fitting that the circle be perfected by this particle capable of being the link that unites perfectly the beginning of the circle with its end. That is how, at the time of creation, woman was the last in time of all things created; in the conception of the divine mind,

however, she was first of all, as much in prestige as in honor, as was written about her by the prophet: "Before the heavens were created, God chose her and chose her first." Indeed, it is a commonplace among philosophers to say: "The end is always the first in intention and the last in execution." For a woman was the last work of God, who introduced her into our world as the queen of a kingdom already prepared for her, adorned and perfect in everything. It is therefore right that every creature love, honor, and respect her; right also that every creature submit to and obey her, for she is the queen of all creatures and their end, perfection, and glory, absolute perfection.

Thus, man is the work of nature, woman the creation of God. Therefore, woman is generally more capable than man of receiving the divine light with which she is often filled, something one can see even today in her refinement and extraordinary beauty.

So then the blessing has been given because of woman, but the law because of man, and this was a law of wrath and curse; for it was to the man that the fruit of the tree had been prohibited, and not to the woman who had not yet been created. God wished her to be free from the beginning, it was therefore the man who committed the sin in eating, not the woman, the man who brought death, not the woman. And all of us have sinned in Adam, not in Eve, and we are infected with original sin not from our mother, who is a woman, but from our father, a man. Moreover, the ancient law ordained the circumcision of all males but left women uncircumcised, deciding without doubt to punish original sin in the sex that had sinned. And besides, God did not punish woman for having eaten, but for having given to the man the occasion of evil, which she did through ignorance, tempted as she was by the devil. The man sinned in all knowledge, the woman fell into error through ignorance and because she was deceived. For she was also the first whom the devil tempted, knowing that she was the most excellent of creatures, and, as Bernard says: "The devil, seeing her admirable beauty and knowing that this beauty was the same that he had known in the divine light when he possessed it, that he enjoyed beyond all the other angels in conversation with God, directed his envy against the woman alone, by reason of her excellence."

Christ, born into our world in the greatest humility, took the more humble male sex and not the more elevated and noble female sex, in order to expiate by this humility the arrogant sin of the first father. In addition, because we have been condemned on account of the sin of the man and not of the woman, God wished that this sin be expiated by the sex that had sinned and that atonement come through the same sex that had been deceived in ignorance. This is why God said to the serpent that the woman, or rather, according to a better reading, the seed of the woman, would crush his head, and not the man or the seed of the man. Perhaps also this explains why the priesthood was conferred by the church on man rather than on woman, because every priest represents Christ, and Christ represents the first person who sinned, that is, Adam himself.

Moreover, when Christ rose from the dead, he appeared first to women, not to men. And it is well known that after the death of Christ some men abjured their faith, although no text attests that women abandoned the faith and the Christian religion. Still further, no persecution, no heresy, no aberration in faith ever occurred because of the deeds of

women; one knows that it was otherwise with men. Christ was betrayed, sold, bought, accused, condemned, suffered the passion, was put on a cross, and finally delivered to death only by men. Even more, he was denied by Peter who loved him and abandoned by all the other disciples; only some women accompanied him to the cross and the tomb. Even a pagan, the wife of Pilate, made greater efforts to save Jesus than any of the men who had believed in him. Add to this the fact that theologians almost unanimously agree that the church at that time dwelled only in a single woman, the Virgin Mary, which makes it fitting to call the female sex religious and holy.

The excellence, goodness, and innocence of women can be amply enough proved by the fact that men, not women, are the origin of all evils. In fact, the first human creature, Adam, because he dared to transgress the law of the Lord, closed the doors of heaven and made us all subject to sin and death. For we have all sinned and we die in Adam, not in Eve. Moreover, his eldest son [Cain] opened the doors of Hell: he was the first envious person, the first homicide, the first fratricide, the first who despaired of the mercy of God. The first bigamist was Lamech. The first to get drunk was Noah; the first to bare the shamefulness of his father was Ham, the son of Noah. The first to be at once tyrant and idolater was Nimrod. The first adulterer was a man; the first incestuous person was a man.

Even in the time of Joshua and of King David men engaged in plunder, operating in gangs so numerous that they set up "princes" of their bands; even today there is an infinite number of them. Hence, all the prisons are filled with men and all gallows everywhere are laden with corpses of men.

Women, to the contrary, have invented all the liberal arts, every virtue and benefit, which the very names of the arts and virtues - being feminine in gender- show better than anything.

But since the excessive tyranny of men prevails over divine right and natural law, the freedom that was once accorded to women is in our day obstructed by unjust laws, suppressed by custom and usage, reduced to nothing by education. For as soon as she is born a woman is confined in idleness at home from her earliest years, and, as if incapable of functions more important, she has no other prospect than needle and thread. Further, when she has reached the age of puberty, she is delivered over to the jealous power of a husband, or she is enclosed forever in a workhouse for religious. She is forbidden by law to hold public office; even the most shrewd among them are not permitted to bring a suit in court.