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Feminism and the Humanists: The Case of Sir Thomas Elyot's Defence of Good Women

by CONSTANCE JORDAN

ELYOT'S *Defence of Good Women*, published in 1540 and dedicated to Anne of Cleves, is one of many treatises on the nature and status of women which appeared during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These works were of various kinds: some were written for a popular audience, others for scholars; some were composed for wives and husbands, others were intended for teachers or the clergy.¹ Within this large body of writing, Elyot's *Defence* belongs to a special class that is particularly easy to identify. Like such works as Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (1361) and Bruni's *De studiis et litteris* (1409), Elyot's *Defence* is *humanist* in character and *apologetic* in purpose. Treatises of this class argue that the cardinal virtues, celebrated in antiquity and represented in classical philosophy and history, have been (and can be) as well exemplified by women as men.

¹For a survey of work on literature on women in the Renaissance see Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, 1956); Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge, 1980); and Lula McDowell Richardson, *The Forerunners of Feminism in French Literature from Christine of Pisa to Marie de Gournay* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Studies in Romance Literature and Languages, XII, 1929). For an analysis of three important treatises of the late *quattrocento* and a useful bibliography of all defenses of women published in Italy in the sixteenth century, see Conor Fahy, "Three Early Renaissance Treatises of Women," *Italian Studies*, II (1951), 30-55. See also the wide-ranging collection of essays on women in political and intellectual life in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries: *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme, (New York and London, 1980).

Not all treatises on women by humanists can be termed feminist.² Some respect traditional notions concerning the subservient place of women in society. But most are dedicated to establishing an equality between sexes. They are distinguished from other works on the subject, whether by humanists or nonhumanists, by their defensiveness, which is coupled with an interest in the secular rather than the religious aspects of the lives of women.

Humanist defenses of women fall into three general categories: defenses of women as a sex—often in the form of a catalogue of female worthies (Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*); discussions of marriage (Erasmus' *Encomium matrimoniae*, 1518 and *De matrimonio christiano*, 1526); and arguments for the education of women (Bruni's *De studiis et litteris*). Individual works often include material in more than one category: discussions of marriage offer examples of virtuous wives like those described in the *De claris mulieribus*; arguments for education insist that learning makes wives more tractable; chronicles of worthies dwell on the beneficial effects of education or the companionableness of a wife. Elyot's *Defence* is unusual in participating in all three categories. His theoretical defense, which refutes Aristotle's notion of the inferiority of women, is supported by evidence from "experience," or history: the Syrian Queen Zenobia who is both an exemplary wife and a woman educated in philosophy and history.

The secular and more particularly the political character of these humanist defenses needs special recognition. The rules of feminine behavior that were most generally acknowledged required of women two principal virtues: silence and chastity. Of these, the first was the most decisive, for it prevented women from venturing outside their families and into public life. Humanists challenged these rules and in effect created others. Fascinated with examples of women who had taken part in the great drama of history, humanists compared them to men, praised their "virility," and entertained the possibility of a single standard for male and female virtue.

Boccaccio, whose *De claris mulieribus* is practically the first example of this genre, characterizes its difference from more traditional treatises on the subject of women and establishes in his preface to his work its particular area of concern—politics and history:

²I use this term despite its apparent anachronism. In asserting that the *vita activa* is open to women, Boccaccio claims that they are the political equals of men by implication. His representative women are intended as proofs of this equality.

However it seemed to me appropriate—and I would not wish to pass over the matter in silence—not to include with the ladies [in my treatise] any from sacred history, either Hebrew or Christian, except Eve. It seemed to me in fact that pagan and Christian ladies have little in common with each other, nor do they move on an equal footing. Ladies of sacred history, following in the paths and the rules of their holy Teacher, often, to attain true eternal glory, forced themselves to tolerate adversities almost beyond human comprehension. Pagan women, on the other hand, attained glory—and with what a burning strength of spirit—either owing to a certain natural instinct; or, more probably, because they were driven by a spark of the fleeting splendor of this world; and sometimes beneath the blow of crushing fortune also faced most severe tests. The first, shining with the true and inexhaustible light, not only live in a paradise well-earned, but also are noted here; for their virginity, chastity, sanctity, and virtue, and the indomitable constancy in chains and the tortures of the flesh and the punishments of tyrants they are described—as their merits require—in several works of holy men, famous for their sacred learning and their obvious majesty. The merits of the second, however, since they are published in no book—as I have said—nor remarked on by anyone, I have set myself to describe, as if to render to them a just reward.³

Boccaccio's interest in proving the moral value of *pagan* women, enlightened by reason and moved by honor, sets him off from authors engaged in conventional modes of celebrating women. His interests and purposes are distinctly different from those of writers who praise women for their faith and morals, as does Christine de Pisan in her *Livre de la cité des dames* (1404),⁴ or for their constancy in love, as does Chaucer, in his half-facetious *Legend of Good Women* (1386). Boccaccio's emphasis on *glory*—not eternal glory but *worldly* glory—indicates how thoroughly he embraced the idea that women, like

³“Attamen visum est, ne omiserim, excepta matre prima, his omnibus fere gentilibus nullas exsacris mulieribus hebreis christianisque miscuisse; non enim satis bene conveniunt, nec equo incedere videntur gradu. He quippe ob eternam et veram gloriam sese fere in adversam persepe humanitati tolerantiam coegere, sacrosancti Preceptoris tam iussa quam vestigia imitantes; ubi ille, seu quodam nature munere vel instinctu, seu potius huius momentanei fulgoris cupiditate percite, non absque tamen acri mentis robore, devenere; vel, fortune urgentis impulsu, non nunquam gravissima pertulere. Preterea he, vera et indeficienti luce corusce, in meritam eternitatem non solum clarissime vivunt, sed earum virginitatem, castimoniam, virtutem et, in superandis tam concupiscentiis carnis quam suppliciis tirannorum invictam constantiam, ipsarum meritis exigentibus, singulis voluminibus a piis hominibus, sacris literis et veneranda maiestate conspicuis, descriptas esse cognoscimus, ubi illarum merita, nullo in hoc edito volumine speciali—uti iam dictum est—et a nemine demonstrata, describere, quasi aliquale reddituri premium, inchoamus.” *De claris mulieribus*, ed. Vittorio Saccaria, in *Tutte le Opere*, X, ed. Vittore Branca (Verona, 1967), pp. 26–28.

⁴Christine de Pisan models her work on Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*, but she eliminates its humanist perspective. See Richardson, op. cit., pp. 13–32.

men, might have a part in civic life—they too, might be inflamed by a “spark of the fleeting splendor of this world.” By excluding from his defense of women examples of saints, martyrs, and patient Griseldas—types other apologists most frequently praise—Boccaccio institutes the character of humanist feminism. Regarding women as public rather than as private persons, he judges them by the criteria proper to civic life.

Political events may have contributed to the humanists’ preoccupation with the notion of women as “citizens” rather than as daughters, wives, and mothers. Women had always held political power, in various ways and degrees, but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries women “governors” became numerous. How they were to be trained for the tasks they would have to undertake, and in what way they were to defer to men were finally questions of national importance.⁵ Treatises like Boccaccio’s which drew attention to politically powerful women from antiquity to the recent past (in his dedication Boccaccio in fact praises Joanna of Naples), stimulated feminist debate. What kind of education was appropriate to a queen or princess into whose hands royal power had passed? What kind of obedience did a ruling queen owe her husband? Could a woman lead troops in battle?

Like two other of Elyot’s works, *Pasquil the Plaine* and *The Knowledge that Maketh a Wise Man*, both written and published early in 1533, the *Defence* is in the form of a dialogue. It dramatizes an argument between three speakers: Candidus, the enlightened defender of women who adopts a Platonic position and insists that women are fit to participate in civic affairs; Caninius, their barking Aristotelian detractor; and finally Candidus’ friend, Queen Zenobia, the captive of the emperor Aurelianus. Candidus’ strategy is simple. He defeats Caninius by logically invalidating the criticisms of misogynists; then he confirms his position with “experience,” or evidence from “history”; and, in conclusion, he adduces a living example of the truth of his opinion, the captive Queen Zenobia. Reliance on “experience” to support a feminist position is common to most defenses of women.

⁵Elyot may have been sensitive to this fact when he wrote *The Governor*. Gordon Schochet remarks that, unlike many contemporary political theorists, Elyot does not justify the monarchy by reference to the patriarchal organization of the family. *Patriarchalism in Political Thought* (New York, 1975) p. 41.

Boccaccio, Castiglione, and others, denying denunciations of women based on received opinion, resort to examples of worthies as proof. Elyot's treatment of "example" is particularly effective in this case: by representing Zenobia as a character in a dialogue, a living voice, he endows her with a kind of "vital authority"—actually defined by Socrates who prefers conversation to writing for the communication of the truth⁶—that an account of her life alone would not provide. Zenobia offers Candidus a "perfyte conclusion" to his argument and by "the example of her lyfe vanquishethe the obstinate mynde of the frowarde Caninius"⁷ because her authority, vested in a palpable being, is so difficult to deny.

To support his attack on women Caninius draws first on the complaints of "poets" (Boccaccio seems indicated, although he is not mentioned) and second on the works of Aristotle touching the subject of women—the two most conspicuous sources of misogynist literature available to Renaissance readers. He begins the debate by declaring that women are faithless, especially in love: in women is "in the stede of fayth, falshode and trechery" (sig. B3). Candidus dismisses the point by asserting that it is one only poets make and they are not to be believed. He alludes to the dubious "truth" of all poetic statements (reminding Caninius that Plato expelled poets from his republic for spreading falsehood), and observes—and this is his principal point—that the poets who see in "al women most beastly conditions" are either ungrateful or disappointed lovers who, rejecting women or else rejected by them, revile them from spite. In effect he denies that the idea of women as faithless has a basis in observed fact and attributes it instead to compensatory fictions created by men to serve their own emotional needs. It is of theoretical importance that Candidus' reasoning here is based on the principle of induction rather than deduction. When humanists examined dogmatic concepts of womanhood by reference to "experience," they could reveal their in-

⁶Socrates defines the spoken word as "an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent." Of this "the written word is properly no more than an image." *Phaedrus*, 276; in *The Dialogues of Plato*, ed. B. Jowett (London, 1892; rpt. New York, 1939), I, p. 279.

⁷Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Defence of Good Women* (London, 1540), sig. A3. Subsequent quotations from this work—in which I have written out abbreviations and modernized the use of i/j, u/v, and vv—will be noted in the text of this essay. My thanks to the Huntington Library for permission to quote from this edition of the *Defence*. The treatise is also available as edited by Edwin Johnston Howard (Oxford, Ohio, 1940).

adequacies. Candidus' answer may actually have a source in a similar reply Castiglione's *Magnifico* directs to Gasparo in *Il libro del cortegiano* (1528);⁸ in its appreciation of psychological determinants it is certainly comparable to the explanation of the apparently natural submissiveness of women offered by Agrippa in his treatise *De nobilitate et praecellentia sexus foeminei* (1529).⁹ Insights like these subverted the orthodox doctrine on women and allowed critics to see it as an effect of psychological and social forces rather than as objectively "true."

In refuting Caninius' neo-Aristotelian misogyny, Candidus has a more difficult task. Caninius begins this phase of his attack by noting Aristotle's claim that women are a "worke of nature unperfecte" (sig. C3), a dictum he takes from the philosopher's discussion of reproduction in *The Generation of Animals*.¹⁰ He continues by pointing out correlative "facts":

They be weaker than men, and have theyr flesshe softer, lasse heare on theyr visages, and theyre voyse sharper. . . . And as concernynge the soule, they lacke hardynes, and in peryles are timerouse, more delycate than men, unapte to paynfulnesse, except they be therto constrained, or steryd by wylfulnessse: And the wytte, that they have, is not substanciall but apyshe. . . .

(sig. C6, C6^v)

⁸"Io. . . ho. . . conosciuti. . . molti, li quali, vedendosi aver in vano tentato e speso il tempo scioccamente, rocorrono a questa nobil vendetta e dicono aver avuto abbondanza di quello che solamente s'hanno imaginato; e par loro che il dir male e trovare invenzioni acciò che di qualche nobil donna per lo vulgo si levino fabule vituperose. . . ." *Il libro del cortegiano*, ed. Bruno Maier (Turin, 1964), III, lxiii; p. 396.

⁹"For anon as a woman is borne even from her infancy, she is kept at home in ydelnes, and as thoughe she were unmete for any hygher busynesse, she is permitted to know no farther than her nedle and her threede. And than whan she commeth to age, able to be married, she is delyvered to the rule and governance of a jelous husband, orels she is perpetually shutte up in a close nounrye. And all offyces belongynge to the commonweale, be forbydden them by the lawes. . . . And thus by these lawes the women being subdewed as it were by force by armes, are constrained to give place to men, and to obeye theyr subdewers, not by no naturall, no divyne necessitie or reason, but by custome, education, fortune, and a certayne tyrannical occasion." *Of the nobilitie and excellencie of womankynde* (London, 1542) sigs. F8, F8^v, G1, G1^v.

¹⁰The female child is the result of a "deviation" from the human norm which is male, *Gen. An.* IV, iii, 767b; trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), pp. 400-401; and she is "as it were a deformity, though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature," *Gen. An.* IV, vi, 775a; pp. 460-61. Cf. Gasparo to the *Magnifico*: "quando nasce una donna, è difetto o error della natura e contra quello che essa vorrebbe fare." *Il libro del cortegiano*, III, xi, p. 352. For a study of the views of Aristotle on women see Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, 1973), pp. 73-96; and Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "Aristotle and Woman," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 9, 9 (1979), 183-213.

There are opinions Caninius discovered in the *History of Animals*.¹¹ And he concludes that women cannot govern: "In the partes of wysedome and civile policy, they be founden unapte, and to have littell capacitie" (sig. C6^v), a view Aristotle expresses in the *Politics*.¹²

It would be difficult to overestimate the support Renaissance misogynists derived from Aristotle. His notion of women as fundamentally inferior to men underlay the arguments of most learned treatises limiting the activities of women to family life. His logic is circular but it was rarely rejected on this account. He derives his doctrine of the subordination of women from his belief that they are morally weaker than men, but in turn he derives this notion of moral weakness (which he correlates with such physical traits of the female as smallness of size, softness of flesh, and need for sleep) from women's subordinate place in the political economy.¹³ Despite the obvious flaw in this reasoning, commentators were generally reluctant to challenge Aristotle's conclusions, which they saw repeatedly corroborated in scripture, notably in Genesis, where Eve's transgression institutes the subordination of wives in accordance with the will of God, and in St. Paul's epistles, where women are forbidden to speak

¹¹"Hence woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondence and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame and self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful, more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action, and requires a smaller quantity of nutriment." *Hist. An.* IX, i, 608b; trans. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (Oxford, 1910), no pagination.

¹²"Hence there are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a different way. And all possess the various parts of the soul, but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form. . . . Hence it is manifest that all the persons mentioned have a moral virtue of their own, and that the temperance of a woman and that of a man are not the same, nor their courage and justice, as Socrates thought, but the one is the courage of command, and the other that of subordination, and the case is similar with the other virtues." *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), I, v, 5–8; 1260a; p. 63. See also the pseudo-*Economics*: "[In matters outside the family] let it be her aim to obey her husband; giving no need to public affairs, nor desiring any part in arranging the marriages of her children. . . . a woman of well-ordered life should consider that her husband's uses are as laws appointed for her own life by divine will, along with the marriage state. . . ." trans. G. Cyril Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), III, i, pp. 400–403. See also the *De anima*, III, 5; 430a21.

¹³See Okin, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–86. Schochet, however, notes that Aristotle distinguishes between the organization of the polis and the household, and also between political justice and household justice, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–24.

in public (especially Timothy 2: 11–12). Even such an ostensible feminist as Vives could not renounce the main tenets of Aristotle's "anti-feminism." In fact Vives' *De institutione foeminae christianae* (1523), which argues for the humanist education of women, paradoxically concludes with his condemnation of women in public life.¹⁴ (Since the purpose of humanist studies was to develop the talents and conscience of the *citizen* rather than the contemplative, Vives' position is at least theoretically self-contradictory.) Elyot's decision to assign Aristotle's notions to a Caninius, a detractor of women, indicates a remarkable willingness to contest the philosopher's authority.

Candidus responds to Caninius' citation of Aristotle with an argument which he claims is equally Aristotelian. He points out that in the *Economics* (a work Renaissance scholars did not yet recognize as spurious) the virtues proper to men and women are, though different, yet directed to the same "purpose"; that is, these virtues are complementary. Paraphrasing his putative source, he asserts that Nature made the man "more strong and courageouse," the woman more "weake, fearefull and scrupulouse." Her "febleness" makes her "more circumspecte," his "strength" makes him more "adventurouse" (sig. C7, C7^v). A man's nature is suited to "preparynge," the acquisition of goods, the woman's to "kepyng," their conservation (sig. D1). Yet when these occupations are compared, that of the women is perceived to be of greater value; indeed, for being less associated with mere physical skills, it is deemed more rational and therefore more characteristically human. Activities which call for circumspection exhibit "Reason", in its manifestations as Discretion," "Election," and "Prudence," in contrast to those which exercise the body. Therefore, Candidus concludes, women are more reasonable and have stronger "wits" than men. This leads him to a final point. Because of her "economic" virtue of circumspection and the superior reason it requires, "a woman is not a creature unperfyte but as it seemeth is more perfyte than man" (sig. D4^v). Here Candidus claims that women are not only equal but even superior to men.

This ingenious refutation of Caninius' neo-Aristotelian argument does not, in fact, derive from the pseudo-*Economics*, where the tasks of men and women are described as interdependent—men acquire, women preserve—but where neither is preferred as the more "rea-

¹⁴A very frutefull and pleasant boke called the instruction of a Christen woman (London, 1540), sigs. E2, E2^v, U2^v.

sonable.”¹⁵ Rather it echoes passages in the third book of *Il libro del cortegiano*, where the Magnifico hints that a comparison of the virtues of men and women (which he claims are “essentially” the same but “accidentally” different—“that in which one differs from the other is something accidental and not essential”) would establish the greater intelligence of women. According to the Magnifico, men are distinguished for their strength, but brute force is not estimable even in war. Women are known to be weak, but their frailty produces in them a mental alertness. Men acquire goods; women preserve them—by implication the worthier task. The Magnifico “defeats” Gasparo with the same logic Candidus uses against Caninius: “there is no doubt that women, for being of softer flesh, are yet more mentally acute and have an intelligence better attuned to speculation than men.”¹⁶ The two versions of the argument are different only in tone. Candidus is relentlessly serious, while the Magnifico “plays” with his audience. Overtly, however, both Candidus and the Magnifico commit themselves to the proposition that physical weakness entails a compensatory intellectual strength.

Having silenced Caninius, Candidus begins a counterattack and addresses directly the question of women in political life. His approach to this question, typical of defenses of women in general, is dictated by the contrasting treatments of the subject—women in politics—that appear in the *Republic* and the *Politics*, the humanists’ principal sources of pro- and anti-feminist argument. The latter work, insisting that women innately possess virtues only in a mode of subordination, unlike men who possess the same virtues in a mode of command, provides authority for limiting the activity of women to the family and for placing them under the rule of their husbands. Aristotle’s model of the state imitates the configuration of power

¹⁵“And so with this purpose in view Divine Providence has fashioned the nature of man and of woman for their partnership. For they are distinguished from each other by the possession of faculties not adapted in every case to the same tasks but in some cases for opposite ones, though contributing to the same end. For Providence made man stronger and woman weaker, so that he in virtue of his manly prowess may be more ready to defend the home, and she, by reason of her kind nature, more ready to keep watch over it; and while he brings in fresh supplies from without, she may keep safe what lies within.” *Ec.* I, iii; op. cit., pp. 332, 333. For the general influence of the *Economics* on Renaissance treatises on women see Maclean, op. cit., 4.5.5, 4.5.6, 4.5.7.

¹⁶“Quello in che l’uno dall’altro son differenti è cosa accidentale e non essenziale . . . non è dubbio che le donne, per esser più molli di carne, sono ancor più ate della mente e de ingegno più accommodato alle speculazioni che gli omini.” Op. cit., III, iii, p. 353.

within the family: at its head is the “class” of men, representing the father; under it is the “class” of women, representing the father’s wife and mother of his children; and beneath these “classes” are slaves, servants, and children. For Aristotle, the family is the fundamental unit of the state, itself an aggregate of families.

Many humanists found this model of government in the state and the family insusceptible to criticism: not only did it appear to correspond to what was recognized as natural law, it also received confirmation from scripture. Plato’s notion of women as endowed with the same virtue as men achieved no significant acceptance by major humanists. They might base their arguments on Socrates’ statement that the virtue in men and women is the same,¹⁷ but they did not accept the politics that Plato then constructs on this premise. Why they did not pursue the notion of women as “guardians,” rulers and governors of the state—an investigation that might have concluded in justifying in principle the right of women to govern men—is unclear. But their unwillingness to examine Plato’s image of the female guardian must in part be a response to the very conditions in which Plato imagined the guardians would live, that is, with property and children in common.¹⁸ Such a class would violate all Christian norms of social life, and for this reason it could not be an element in a Christian politics.

To validate gynocracy, humanists took another approach which is well illustrated in the *Defence*. They left questions of authority aside and concentrated rather on the “evidence” in history and what it might be seen to imply.¹⁹ Some of the “evidence” cited as “example” is patently ridiculous. Most humanist defenses of women do not make any distinction between figures of myth (Dido) and women who are the subject of essentially “historical” accounts (Cleopatra), but consider them all equally convincing. This lack of discrimination must often have caused Renaissance readers (as it causes modern readers) to call into question *all* the evidence supplied in such defenses. It was not until humanists developed a sense of what is really acceptable evidence that they could begin to offer cogent arguments

¹⁷*Meno* 71–72.

¹⁸*Rep.* 454–57. See also Okin, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–43.

¹⁹Plutarch sets a precedent in his introductory remarks to the *Mulierum virtutes*. On the importance of historicism in demolishing the authority of paradigms of femininity see Maclean, *op. cit.*, 6.2.3.

against assertions of the “natural” inferiority of women. In this respect, the question of evidence is like the question of psychological determinants. In both cases, received opinion can only be challenged by observations based either on actual experience or “experience” for which there is some valid or verifiable historical reference.

But proofs based on “example” have another even more serious shortcoming: they produce paradoxical arguments. The women who illustrate feminine excellence are noted for acting courageously and intelligently—in short, in a manner specified as “virile.” These women logically prove the worth of their sex by denying it: a strange form of defense. While it questions sexual stereotypes, i.e. some women can do men’s work, it also seems to confirm gender-related values, i.e. all that is female is inferior. The regularity with which these exemplary women are labelled “manly” finally undermines their rhetorical purpose. These limitations aside, however, the practical orientation of defenses which proceed by example did permit a consideration of how women perform tasks of government customarily assigned to men even if it excluded debate on more contentious matters of principle. An account (whether fictitious or not) of a woman who was successful in speaking in council or commanding an army obviously has bearing on the larger question of gynocracy and tends to undermine theoretical denunciations of such government.

Candidus’ perception of the place of women in political life is expressed in two propositions: “in armes women have been found of no lyttell reputation” (sig. D6^v), and “the wyttes of women are apte . . . to wisdom and civile policie” (sig. D4^v). These claims—that women have the capacity to perform in the two fields of endeavor crucial to the success of a Renaissance prince²⁰—are far-reaching, although not unusual in humanist defenses of women. (They are certainly implicit in the *De claris mulieribus* and *Il libro del cortegiano*.) If Candidus can substantiate them, he will have established the validity of the female “governor.” The notion that women could take part in active warfare was supported by instances in which this actually happened. Agrippa, for example, alludes admiringly to “la Pucelle” in

²⁰Whether a woman could wage a war was obviously a critical question. Cf. Machiavelli: “Uno principe non avere altro obietto, nè altro pensiero, nè prendere cosa alcuna per sua arte, fuora della guerra e ordin e discipline di essa; perchè quella è sola arte che si aspetta a chi comanda. . . .” *Machiavelli’s The Prince*, ed. and trans. Mark Musa (New York, 1964), I, xiv, p. 120.

his *De nobilitate*,²¹ and Castiglione to Isabella of Castile in *Il libro del cortegiano*.²² Yet popular and learned opinion was generally opposed to the practice. A woman's comparative lack of physical strength constituted a rational basis for limiting her part in war. In some cases the prospect of women at war was regarded with angry shock. Vives, for example, warns women that they cannot succeed at this deadly occupation: "Therefore you women that . . . go about to hurle downe townes afore you . . . lyght upon a hard rocke. Whereupon though you brouse and shake contres very sore, yet they scape and you perishe."²³ The idea that women might be adept at "civile policie" was almost as often the object of criticism. The practice of "civile policie" naturally entailed the skilful use of rhetoric and oratory and in fact women were prevented from speaking in public. The prohibition originates in the literature of classical antiquity and scripture. A correlative of Aristotle's conception of a woman as emotional was a belief that her judgment was likely to be faulty. She tended to speak a great deal but little to the point.²⁴ St. Paul simply forbade women to preach (speak in public), and this rule seems to have been associated in the popular imagination with Eve's role in persuading Adam to disobey God's commandment in paradise. Women were commonly viewed as garrulous; if they were also clever they might become dangerous. In one of the earliest humanist treatises on the education of girls, Bruni explicitly denies his students instruction in eloquence: "Rhetoric in all its forms—public discussion, forensic argument, logical fence, and the like—lies absolutely outside the province of women."²⁵ Vives is even more vehement: "As for eloquence I have no great care nor a woman nedeth it nat but she nedeth goodnes

²¹"Howe moche doo the Frenchemen prayse a yonge damsell, whiche beinge descended of a lowe image, toke upon her after the manner of the Amazons, to leade the forward of the army; and she fought so valiantly, and hadde soo good chaunce, that the French men beleved verily, that by her prowesse, they recovered the relm of France out of the Englishshe mens handes." *Of the nobilities*, sig. F2, F2^v.

²²"A lei sola si po dar l'onore del glorioso acquisto del regno di Granata; ché in cosi lunga e difficil guerra contra nimici ostinati . . . mostrò sempre col consiglio e con la persona propria tanta virtù, che forse a'tempi nostri pochi principi hanno avuto ardire non che di imitarla, ma pur d'averle invidia." Op. cit., III, xxxv; p. 386.

²³*Instruction of a Christen woman*, sig. U2^v.

²⁴"Silence gives grace to woman' though that is not the case likewise with a man." *Politics*, I, v, 508; 1260a, ed. cit., p. 65.

²⁵Lionardo Bruni, *De studiis et litteris*, trans. William Harrison Woodward in *Vittorino de Feltrina and Other Humanist Educators* (Cambridge, 1897), pp. 124, 126.

and wysedome." And he makes a precise connection between the study of oratory and the practice of government:

Wene you it was for nothyng that wyse men forbad you rule and governaunce of contreis and that saynt Paule byddeth you shall nat speke in congregatyon and gatherynge of people? All this same meaneth that you shall nat medle with matters of realmes or cities. Your own house is a cite great inough for you; as for the abrode neither know you nor be you knowen.²⁶

Despite these rules determining feminine behavior, many defenders of women, and particularly humanists, included in their work "examples" of women who excelled in both forbidden activities. Mythical figures are cited as the founders of various arts, and certain queens, both mythical and historical, are praised for their administrative and martial achievements. Women scholars, orators, and historians are described as paragons of intellectual virtue. A survey of these panegyric accounts suggests the extent to which their writers—almost entirely male—saw fit to question the feminine paradigms that tended decisively to deny to women a part in public life.

Queen Zenobia is among the most frequently described of female worthies: she appears in Vives' *De institutione*, in Agrippa's *De nobilitate*, in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," and in Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, a popular paraphrase of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*. Boccaccio tells her story twice. In the *De casibus virorum*, he emphasizes her fame, thus fulfilling the purpose of that work: "and if great virtue rises then it must also fall. Not even Zenobia could escape this unscathed." He barely hints that her "fall" is owing to her violation of norms of feminine behavior: "[Aurelius] having thought it unsuitable that a woman possess part of the Roman Empire, took up arms against Zenobia."²⁷ In the *De claris mulieribus*, he eliminates the fortune theme and describes her simply in superlatives: most learned, most courageous, and so forth. He even manages to transform her catastrophic capture into a complimentary occasion: "Just as if he had conquered the greatest of generals and the fiercest enemy of the re-

²⁶*The instruction of a Christen woman*, sig. E2, E2^v. Later he reverses himself and declares he will not condemn eloquence, E2^v. But the tenor of the treatise as a whole is negative.

²⁷"et si multa sit virtus adscendenti tunc quoque cadendum est. A quo nec Zenobia immunis evadere potuit." "[Aurelius] indignum ratus foeminam Romani partem Imperii possidere in Zenobiam arma convertit." *De casibus illustrium virorum*, a facsimile edition of the Paris edition of 1520. (Gainesville, Fla., 1962), VIII, p. 192.

public, Aurelius rejoiced in glory and kept her for a triumph and led her to Rome with her sons."²⁸

Elyot's Zenobia is in many respects the most vital of these representations; she incarnates the central paradox so often generated by the introduction of humanist ideals into the context of an essentially Christian antifeminism largely shaped by the persistence of Aristotelian norms. She demonstrates to a greater degree than many of her counterparts the qualities conventional to women, but also, by contrast, those that distinguish humanist models. She duly conforms to the expectations of conservative readers by being modest, dutiful, temperate, patient, and obedient to her husband. Yet she is also unmistakably the product of a humanist imagination working (or playing) on the possibility that a woman can also attain a full measure of humanity.

Her education was characteristically humanist. She studied philosophy and history until she was twenty and did not marry before that time. Moreover she reports that her "lernynge was had of none honeste man in any derysyon" (sig. E3). Learned women were frequently thought to be disposed to levity and the charge was regularly denied by their defenders. Hyrde, for example assures his readers that an educated wife is more not less tractable²⁹—a view also endorsed by More³⁰ and Erasmus.³¹ Her widowhood allowed her to demonstrate her civic virtues (the product, she asserts, of her education); immediately realizing her precarious position as regent for her sons that "I beinge a woman, shoulde nothyng be feared" (sig. E3), she took control of the state, making speeches, establishing laws (on the basis of her acquaintance with household economy), inspecting fortifications, and even conquering territory by the extraordinary

²⁸"Ex quo non aliter quam si maximum superasset duces et acerrimum rei publice hostem, Aurelianus gloriatus est eamque triumpho servavit et aduxit cum filiis Romanam." Op. cit., C, p. 414.

²⁹See Hyrde's preface to Margaret More's translation of Erasmus' *Precatio dominica, A devout treatise upon the pater noster* (London, n.d.), sig. A4, A4^v. This preface was written in 1524 for Frances Brandon, daughter of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk and his wife Mary, daughter of Henry VIII.

³⁰See "Letter to his daughters," 1524; quoted in Foster Watson, *Vives and the Renaissance Education of Women* (New York, 1912), p. 179.

³¹Erasmus praises More's "school" for young women in a letter to John Faber; quoted in Watson, op. cit., p. 178. He also praised Catherine for her learning on several occasions; see Garrett Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (Boston, 1941), pp. 181–84, who cites Allen III, 602; IX, 401.

means of moral suasion. She reports “[I] added moche more to myne Empire, not soo moche by force, as by renoume of juste and politike governaunce, whiche all men had in suche admyration, that dyverse of our said ennemys . . . chase . . . to remayne in our subjection than to retourne to theyr owne countryey” (sig. E5). But her most daring and unusual trait—one that shows her humanist origins more vividly than any other—is her real autonomy in relation to her husband. Elyot is careful to express himself in terms as decorous as possible; nevertheless his message is clear. Zenobia obeys her husband, but only to a point. “Justice,” she says, taught her to give “due obedience” to her husband and restrained her from “anythyng whiche [was] not semely” (sig. E1^v). Furthermore she declares that a wife must suit her will to her husband. But she also insists that a wife is exempt from these constraints on her freedom if what her husband wishes “may tourne them bothe to losse or dyshonesty” (sig. E2). That is, a wife must actually exercise her own judgment. Here Elyot may well be remembering the spurious Aristotle who cites Homer’s instruction on marriage: “It is clear that the poet is evil and dishonorable while unselfishly furthering to the best of their power one another’s honourable and righteous aims.”³² But Elyot’s emphasis on what a wife must *not* do recalls the other source on which he has already relied heavily: Zenobia’s words echo Ludovico’s reply to Federico, who asked whether a courtier should obey a dishonorable command: “if [your lord] commands you to do a dishonorable thing, not only are you not obligated to do it, you are obligated not to do it, both on your own account and in order to not to be the one to contribute shame to your lord.”³³ In concluding this part of the dialogue, Elyot does, admittedly, minimize the radicalism of Zenobia’s views. She ends her rules of marriage by saying that a wife should dissemble her “disobedience”: if she cannot do her husband’s “wyll,” “than should she seme rather to give him wise counsaile, than to appere disobedient or sturdy” (sig. E2). This reservation does not, however, obscure the substance of her argument: like a courtier, a wife must finally act as if she had free will.

Both Agrippa and Erasmus stress the companionableness of a wife

³²Ec. III, 4; ed. cit., p. 414.

³³“però se esso vi comandasse che faceste un tradimento, non solamente non sete obligato a farlo, ma sete obligato a non farlo, e per voi stesso, e per non esser ministro della vergogna del singor vostro.” Op. cit., II, xxiii; pp. 225, 226.

and see marriage as a relationship of mutuality. Erasmus' remark that an ill-behaved wife is due to an ill-behaved husband—"an evyll wyfe is nat wont to chaunce but to evyll husbandes"³⁴—implies that if a husband embarks on dishonorable conduct he can expect to find his wife similarly engaged—in ways that may indeed appear "disobedient." But no humanist, to my knowledge, gives a wife as much autonomy as Elyot does by casting her in an essentially "political" role. It is not accidental that here Elyot's Zenobia resembles Castiglione's courtier because in a sense they confront the same problem.³⁵ Both wife and courtier function as advisors to persons to whom they owe affection and loyalty. Both must serve their "lord," but—and this is the crucial contribution both works make to the concept of "service"—only if they are satisfied that his course of action is not one which will bring dishonor on him, his court, or his state.

Zenobia's obvious excellence, her modesty, and her competence confound Caninius who admits defeat. But the victory is Candidus' alone, for Zenobia, despite her virtue, remains the captive of the Emperor Aurelianus and among the conquered not the conquering. Her character has a certain pathos, and one is tempted to think that Elyot, who had nothing to say about courageous and intelligent women in any of his other works, wrote the *Defence* somewhat half-heartedly and perhaps to fulfill an obligation. Zenobia must nevertheless be recognized as fine example of a type, a representative of the powerful women of antiquity who first captured Boccaccio's imagination. Because he and later humanists perceived these women as free from the

³⁴A *ryght frutefull epystle devysed by the moste excellent clerke Erasmus in laude and prayse of matrimony* (London, n.d.), D2^v. This is a translation of the *De matrimonio christiano*, by Rychard Tavernour, published in 1534. Erasmus' words are echoed by Agrippa: "for an evill wife never happeneth but to an evil husband" who further counsels "And let not [thy wife] be subject unto the, but let her be with the in all trust and counsayle, and let her be in thy house, not as a drudge, but as a maistresse of the house. . . ." *The Commendation of Matrimony*, (London, 1534), sigs. C3, C6^v. This is a translation, by David Clapham, of the *De sacramento matrimonii declamatio*, 1526. For a different view see Vives, *The office and dutie of an husband* (London, n.d.) sig. N6. The theological and philosophical background to the rule of obedience for a wife is briefly presented in Maclean, *op. cit.*, 2.7.5, 2.8.1, 2.9.1

³⁵In his article "Politics and the Praise of Women: Political Doctrine in the Courtier's Third Book," in *Castiglione: the Ideal and the Real in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Robert Hanning and David Rosand (New Haven, 1982), pp. 29–34, Dain A. Trafton argues that in Book III Castiglione actually evolves a basis for the political life of the courtier who is represented there in the collective image of the numerous ladies celebrated by the Magnifico.

constraints imposed on the sex by convention, they could invest them with attributes answering to the rational criteria for public life that were in part the product of their own investigations. The pagan women celebrated in humanist defenses functioned collectively as the image of what might be possible were accepted social custom, shaped by Christianity and medieval scholasticism, no longer to determine the nature and status of women in European society. They presented a fruitful enigma, a point of reference for the interesting doubts and difficult questions surrounding the accepted view of women as categorically inferior to men. The image itself—of a woman who is the political equal of the man—is always an image of the culturally alien. The figures of Hippolyta, Semiramis, Dido, Camilla, and Artemisia, among others, are united not only by their “virility” but also by their “barbarism.” They are always on the enemy side; the writer imagines them as it were at the borders of the culturally constituted community to which his work is addressed, even as threatening the integrity of that community. But because they often brilliantly exemplify the “non-barbaric” or “civilized” values of the writer’s own society—as the male enemy does not (compare Artemisia with Xerxes or Camilla with Turnus)—they also invite sympathy. The conflict between attitudes—overt disapproval marked with fear on one hand and occasional admiration on the other—is later epitomized in the great warrior maidens of Renaissance epic: Merediana, Antea, Marfisa, Bradamante, Clorinda, Britomart.

The historical assimilation of the concept of political equality among the sexes, a process accelerated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is partly indicated by the domestication of these characters during this period. The difference between the Merediana of the anonymous fifteenth-century *Orlando* and Ariosto’s Bradamante a century later has nothing to do with their characters, which generally adhere to a chivalric type: they are remarkably similar in being courageous, resourceful, noble, passionate, and “virile.” They are distinguished only by their religion and national origin: the former, an infidel, comes from “Paganian,” while the latter is Christian and French. The proliferation of the type in later epic (Ariosto, Spenser, and Tasso) suggests that as the concept of political equality became less strange, writers responded to a need to discriminate among possibilities. Ariosto’s two female knights, Marfisa and Bradamante,

and Spenser's comparable pair, Radigund and Britomart, represent each poet's analysis of the positive and negative elements of what was once a single image.

Some readers have identified the character and concerns of the central figure in Elyot's *Defence*, Queen Zenobia, with those of Catherine of Aragon.³⁶ The case for such an identification has been made largely on comparative grounds. Like Elyot's Zenobia, a queen who exemplifies the "virile" virtues appropriate to a governor or prince, Catherine was educated in the humanist manner; by her defeat of James IV at Flodden she was known as a competent general; she was recognized as a skillful diplomat, versed in languages and knowledgeable in the affairs of state.³⁷ Moreover certain of the circumstances of Zenobia's life—as Elyot presents them—recall Catherine's. Zenobia is the prisoner of the Emperor Aurelianus; although she is not confined to her house her movements are restricted. In 1531, Henry ordered Catherine to prepare to seek a domicile apart; in 1533, she was removed under guard from Ampthill to Buckden in Huntingtongshire. Her route was lined with sympathetic subjects who must indeed have seen her as a "captive queen."³⁸ Finally, Elyot's Zenobia comes from "Surry" (sig. D7)—possibly a printer's error for Syria but if not then perhaps a reference to Catherine's house in Richmond. These points of similarity, while too general to be decisive, have made readers believe it at least possible that Elyot intended Zenobia to represent Catherine.

Such a reading places the question of Elyot's purpose in writing the *Defence* in a curious light. If Zenobia makes Catherine, then Elyot's treatise becomes a defense of one woman, Catherine herself. But would he have written such a treatise in 1540, five years after Catherine's death? To support the Zenobia-Catherine identification the reader must begin by assuming either that Elyot had some plausible reason for praising Catherine in 1540 (or late in 1539), or that he wrote the *Defence* at an earlier date when such praise might have been appropriate. Defenses of Catherine as Henry's wife, that is, treatises against the divorce, did in fact appear in England from 1529 to 1532.

³⁶See Stanford E. Lehmborg, *op. cit.*, p. 176; also Foster Watson, *op. cit.*, pp. 308–13.

³⁷Garrett Mattingly, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–41; 157–62; 174–75; 203–19.

³⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 335; 374–75.

Elyot's *Defence* can not be included in this group, however; it does not touch on the question of divorce.

A full discussion of these possibilities is beyond the scope of this paper. Certain well-established facts do, however, suggest a connection between *The Defence*, Catherine's divorce, and its aftermath—Henry's virtual imprisonment of her and of Mary. During the period of Catherine's separation from Henry and before her death, that is, from the summer of 1532 to January of 1536, Elyot led a double life. Outwardly he complied with royal policy, and even participated in Henry's government, but secretly he was a party to the conspiracy organized by Eustache Chapuys, the ambassador of Charles V, and supported by men who were prepared to welcome on English shores the forces of Charles V, depose Henry, and place Catherine on the throne as regent for Mary.³⁹ Chapuys had sought to persuade humanists to write against the divorce in 1531 and earlier—he contacted Elyot about such a treatise in 1532—and it seems not unreasonable to assume that he might also have been interested in defenses of Catherine as regent after the divorce had occurred.⁴⁰ If the *Defence* is associated on stylistic and thematic grounds with Elyot's other dialogues, written in 1533 and in fact critical of Henry, the case for reading it as propaganda is further strengthened. Specifically it becomes an apology for Catherine as regent for Mary—her position if Chapuys' conspiracy were to be successful. Persons disaffected with Henry and his new queen who might have been expected to rally behind Catherine in the event of an invasion must then be considered Elyot's intended audience, and the *Defence* a device contrived to convince them to accept Catherine's leadership.

Henry himself thought Catherine capable of doing what Chapuys had designed for her, and early in 1535 he described to his council the sort of conflict that would ensue were Charles V to invade England: "The lady Catherine is a proud stubborn woman of very high cour-

³⁹"It is clear that Elyot sympathized with Catherine's cause, and he continued to give Chapuys information and support for a number of years. In 1534, Chapuys went so far as to include Elyot among those who would join a Spanish-led conspiracy to rid England of her 'heretic' king. Elyot's policy was dangerous; had Chapuys not kept his secrets unusually well, Elyot might have been tried for treason, and another head might have rolled on Tower Green. No man could safely serve two masters if one of them was Henry VIII." Lehmborg, *op. cit.*, p. 108. The fullest account of the conspiracy is given in Mattingly, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰For Chapuys' contacts with Elyot see Paul Friedman, *Anne Boleyn* (London, 1884), I, p. 151; he cites Vienna Archives, P.C. 227, iii fols. 42 and 50.

age. If she took it into her head to take her daughter's part she could quite easily take the field, muster a great army, and wage against me a war as fierce as any her mother Isabella waged in Spain."⁴¹ As Henry knew, Isabella's wars had overturned the throne of Castile. He could not therefore have drawn a more alarming parallel to the possible outcome of his own struggle to maintain power than the events in Spain a generation earlier, events in which Catherine had a clear personal interest.

A less obvious but possibly more important beneficiary of the *Defence* might have been Catherine herself. As Mattingly's brilliant biography of her establishes, she continuously opposed on grounds both logical and emotional the projected invasion and insurrection. Legally, since she rested her case against Henry's divorce on the grounds that her own marriage was legitimate, she could not behave in a way that might cast suspicion on her status as wife. Above all, this entailed obedience to her husband, a condition which she would manifestly violate by participating in, inspiring, or even condoning a conspiracy to depose him. The nature of her defense required that she, a wife, be at her husband Henry's command. Is it this paradoxical situation that Elyot's addresses when Zenobia qualifies the extent of a wife's obedience? If Zenobia's statements apply to Catherine, they praise the queen's refusal to allow Henry to commit an action that "maye tourne them bothe to losse or dyshonesty" and encourage her to continue in that refusal. Catherine also declined to support Chapuys' conspiracy on the grounds that it would lead to shedding Christian blood.⁴² Was Catherine's pacificism partly responsible for Elyot's emphasis on Zenobia's irenic interests, her use of persuasion instead of force, her adherence to a strategy of moral not literal warfare?

There are specific ways in which the *Defence* appears to speak to Catherine's condition. More broadly, the *Defence* might have been intended to educate Catherine to perceive herself as regent. Its emphasis on the secular life open to women, the moral duties of government which might be carried on by queens as well as kings, and the association of an independent judgment with early and prolonged training in philosophy and history would have constituted a covert

⁴¹Mattingly (op. cit., p. 405), who cites Cal. SP Span. V, 430.

⁴²Mattingly (op. cit., p. 362), who cites Cal. SP Span. IV, ii, 688 (V.A.). See also pp. 404-405; Cal. SP Span. IV, ii, 291, 554, 596.

appeal to Catherine's memories of her mother and her own childhood. It would have presented her with an image of womanhood in which were expressed Isabella's fortitude (so impressively recalled by Henry) and her belief in the value of a humanist education, which Catherine in turn insisted her own daughter have. It would, moreover, have stood in significant contrast to another humanist's defense of women, Vives' *De institutione*, one that Catherine knew well and had had written for Mary.⁴³ If Elyot knew it—and it is hard to imagine he did not—he could not have helped seeing it as deleterious to the cause he secretly espoused from 1532 to 1535. It expressed the views most likely to discourage Catherine from attempting to govern, even as regent; it would have made it difficult for her to command troops, to speak in Parliament or council, in short to be a ruling queen. Vives' influence on Catherine was well known to be important, and Elyot might naturally have been concerned to provide Catherine with a model of femininity more aggressively political than that Vives had presented—a model which specifically permitted her to “medle in matters of realms.” These are of course, only speculations. But one thing is sure. Were Chapuys' plans to have succeeded, Catherine would have had to take Elyot's model seriously.

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⁴³Vives came to England in 1523 and remained for five years, lecturing at Oxford and gracing Henry's court. Catherine had commissioned him to write the *De institutione* which he brought with him to England. Mattingly guesses that Catherine, having realized that Mary might one day rule, was concerned to have her trained to her part, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–89. But if so, the treatise itself, with all its prohibitions against women in government, would have disappointed and perhaps alarmed her.