

GENDERED VIRTUE: A STUDY OF ITS MEANING AND EVOLUTION IN EARLY MODERN

FRANCE

by

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## Abstract

Virtue in early modern France was a broad concept considered by clergymen, philosophers, and moralists as an instrument for measuring and implementing human ethics. This unprecedented research seeks to track the development of the notion of virtue from a gendered and dichotomous notion to a unique and undivided term.

The word *virtue* is constantly present in French texts such as *manuels de conduite*<sup>1</sup>, since the medieval period. Thus, it can be regarded as one of the most significant concepts defining genders in Western civilization. However, it is difficult for modern readers to grasp the complexity of the debate unless it is explained through its socio-historical and cultural implications regarding gender behavior. What is the author referring to when he/she uses the word virtue? Is it chastity for women, strength for men, or just the achievement of the highest moral standard? What are the social implications of virtue?

Through an inter and multidisciplinary study involving literature, religion, philosophy, folklore, women and gender studies, and sociology, this cutting-edge research revolves around the literary analysis of conduct manuals, plays, novels and treatises, from the middle ages to the 18th century. Its objective is to map the evolution of the notion of virtue by evidencing social fluctuation of gender differences and conceptualizing our western civilization through the lenses of its moral discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Conduct manual.

## **Dedication**

To my family.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

Sophists claimed to teach virtue to young statesman and nobility. Hence virtue, is a concept that exists since the Classical Greece; the *arete* of the Greek was tied to moral excellence, and this excellence was measured by its virtues. From its genesis, all the qualities condensed in the six letter word (virtue), were a social thermometer of behavior. Virtue was only expected and recognized on the highest ranks of society. Moreover, it was a quality identified only in men as it will be evidenced in the period of the Roman *Res Publica* (Parry, Ancient Ethical Theory).

Departing from the origins of virtue, this thesis objective is to track the changes in the definition of the term all the way to the age of French enlightenment and emphasis is placed on the gendered aspect of it. There is ample research on representations of virtue in art as well as on how the list of qualities considered as virtue have changed and increased during the centuries towards a more generic term (Langer 1999, Bonardi 2010, McDonell 2006, Green 2011). However, no investigation has focused on following the evolution of virtue and its relevance in the study of gender's inequality.

In order achieve the main objective of this research, conduct manuals, plays, novels and treatises, from the middle ages to the 18th century were analyzed from an inter and multidisciplinary perspective. Literature, religion, philosophy, women and gender studies, and sociology were the lenses that allowed to better understand the fluctuation of virtue through the centuries. Its objective is to map the evolution of the notion of virtue by evidencing social fluctuation of gender differences and conceptualizing our western civilization through the lenses of its moral discourse.

The first chapter of this research is intended as introductory, as it digs into the origin of the word virtue. Greeks and Romans considered this quality as essential not only in the private realm, but also for the matters of the State. The gendered conception of virtue starts back in the time of the classical philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle, representing to very different thoughts regarding this matter.

The second chapter is devoted to the medieval era, a transition from a polytheistic society to a Church ruled State. It is during the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century that we start talking about a gendered social demeanor. Consequently, French medieval conduct was governed by conduct books; namely, *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de La Tour Landry* (1371), *Le Ménagier* (1393), and *Livre des trois vertus* (1405). These manuals set the standards for young men's and women's behavior facing the most common social scenarios. However, virtue is treated from different approaches depending on the gender of the author as well as the gender of the person to whom it is addressed. Virtue was conceived in the realm of appearance for women, and social rank for men. Thus, these facts are the groundwork towards a gendered virtue premise.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century is a period of cultural transition from the medieval ages to the classical era, and it is characterized by its richness and fecundity of literary, artistic, and linguistic creation. The perception of the world changed due to scientific and geographical discoveries during the previous century. This new perspective is unavoidably reflected in the cultural realm, the reason why this century is the cradle of the French Renaissance. However, education continued to be gendered, and there were social standards of behavior and knowledge expected of girls and boys. In his major literary work, *Essais* (1580), Michel de Montaigne explains what



would be the ideal education for both genders, not only intellectual but also physical. Furthermore, he dedicates a whole chapter to his reflective thoughts about virtue as a purpose of the soul. In this text, male and female education was separately treated, but contrary to what we would be expecting, virtue is regarded as a general quality, there is no gender differentiation made by Montaigne in his text.

Marie de Gournay, *fille d'alliance*<sup>2</sup> of Montaigne, represents a feminine literary discourse amidst the transition from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is her alliance and close friendship to this moralist in 1588, that guarantees her a voice in a society in which women's intellectual capacity was repeatedly underestimated and marginalized. Hence, the posthumous edition of Montaigne's *Essais* (1595), served as a stage to her claims when she cleverly expresses in its preface: "Bienheureux es-tu, lecteur, si tu n'es point de ce sexe, qu'on interdit de tous les biens, l'interdisant de la liberté : [...] afin de lui constituer pour seule félicité, pour vertus souveraines et seules, l'ignorance, la servitude et la faculté de faire le sot"<sup>3</sup> (Noiret) ; she used this same words to introduce the reader to her work *Grief des Dames* (1626). What Marie de Gournay is implying is that virtue is, according to the society of her time, a non-existent quality for women as it is forbidden to the female gender; only those who are lucky enough to be men can be subjects of such appreciated quality. This evidence regarding the exclusion of virtue in female gender serves as one of the cornerstones for this work as it supports our main research statement.

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<sup>2</sup> Daughter by choice.

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are you, reader, if thou are not from that sex, to which we prohibit all goods, banning it from freedom [...] in order to grant them as unique happiness, and as sovereign and exclusive virtues, ignorance, servitude and the faculty of make a foul out of themselves"

Albeit the evidence of a period in which virtue was a forbidden attribute to woman, language evolved nourished by social changes, and virtue was one of those words that were reformed as it is explained in chapter three. Thus it formally acquired a moral component related to the female gender during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the light of the Richelet's dictionary (1680), virtue is defined as power, strength. Moreover, it defines women and men of virtue as subjects possessing virtue. Nonetheless, in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1694), the term stays related to the same physical strength, but it sums up a new meaning, as virtue acquires a new perspective: it is referred to as chastity, a quality expected only from women.

As we finally arrive to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we leave a period of intellectual blossom and enter to a revolutionary era in which a whole new army of thinkers assembles. The fourth and last chapter of this research explains how although absolute monarchy is still the established political system, a new discourse is planted in the grounds of its own realm. François Fénelon, royal tutor of the court of Louis XIV ignites the anger of the king with *Les aventures de Télémaque*<sup>4</sup> (1699), a didactic novel for its pupil, the dauphin, that turned out to be a camouflaged denunciation of monarchical principles. Additionally, he claims private life as a less difficult environment to achieve virtuosity. To seek the crown in order to govern other men is a folly, a crushing servitude. Here we see virtue presented in an unprecedented scenario: it is not in court life that we can achieve it but in the calm and correctness of the private realm. During this same century another name on which we will set the spotlight is Jean-Jacques

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<sup>4</sup> The Adventures of Telemachus.

Rousseau, who so fervidly defended and promoted education of citizen. Virtue is the central lesson of his novels *Julie* (1761), and *Émile* (1762).

History is attached to time and it evolves with no interruption acquiring overwhelming dimensions. Thus, historians have divided it in periods, in order to better understand and study societal change. As Le Goff clearly explains, “*dividing history into periods is not only possible but necessary*” (116). Nonetheless, the task of periodization is a double edge sword, because human development is continuous and the only way it can be clearly understood is by taking a look to the big picture. The shift from a period to another, explains Le Goff, takes meaningful and genuine revolutions, and those, are not abundant (*ibid.*). As this work aims to track the fluctuations of virtue, the approach to history was from a long perspective, and the selection of time periods was based on the existence of literary pieces containing major reflections on virtue and its meaning.

Furthermore, Laqueur’s explanation on how men’s and women’s hierarchy has shifted from vertical to horizontal during centuries, is very appropriate and of great importance to this research for it allows to better understand how feminine and masculine virtue has been positioned in different time periods (10). During the classical era, all the way to the medial times, virtue of men and women were set in a vertical plane, meaning that men were on top as superior beings. As we approach to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the plane shifts to a horizontal plane in which men and women are claimed as hierarchically equals, yet virtue continues to have different meanings according to the gender.

All things considered, this work does not attempt to spread the development of the word virtue evenly, attention will focus on those periods where reflections about virtue is densest and

treated by the most significant authors, and will omit or pass more rapidly over those periods and authors which didn't enhance what was previously stated.

## Chapter I: Understanding the Complex World of Virtue and its Origins

The origin of virtue is Greek, and it is through antiquity that we can clarify and demystify this complex term that has been the determining factor of human demeanor during more than four centuries, for the simple reason that all modern approaches on virtue are based on the philosophical currents of antiquity (Parry, “Ancient Ethical History”).

Ancient philosophers considered that a virtuous life was a well lived life. A life lived ignoring passions, better yet, defeating passions. Through ethical theories developed by their reflective thoughts, the philosophers of the ancient Greece, attempted to grasp the very essence of important notions such as virtue (*arete*), the virtues, happiness (*eudaimonia*), and the soul (*psyche*). Here we will only keep the fragments of the most relevant philosophical currents susceptible of clarifying all notions of virtue (*ibid.*).

In the ancient world, the original Greek word for virtue was *arete*, and while philosophers struggled to find a definition of it, they had less trouble listing all genres of virtue. Courage, temperance, and justice were considered types of virtue, and together were qualified as moral, for they were commonly present in daily life practices. Moral virtues were considered volitional, Perry explains them as “a settled disposition to act in a certain way; justice, for instance, is settled disposition to act, let’s say, so that each one receives their due”. Virtue is not measured in degrees, one is virtuous or not. Hence, a just person is one whom acts justly by conviction, and the same applies for courage and temperance. Additional to moral virtues, there is prudence, an intellectual virtue whose objective is knowledge and contemplation. It is qualified as intellectual because it relies on reason. Virtue was considered a worthy good of the soul, it revealed the

presence of goodness within a person. Its relevance in ancient civilizations derives from its link to the ultimate objective in life, happiness.

Following the classical virtues, the church developed its own virtues and gave birth to the theological virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity. Nonetheless, this list of virtues will become longer and longer as the centuries pass, taking dimensions that will force to consider virtue as all that is opposed to vice. As Bonardi explains, theological virtues are Christian virtues by default, for the simple reason that they have God as its only origin and purpose.

As we advance through the centuries, we find in Classical Latin the word *uirtūs, uirtūtis*; a feminine term defining the most common masculine attributes. According to the Oxford Latin Dictionary (1982), during antiquity, virtue was defined as the typical qualities of true men; such qualities were: manly spirit, resolutions, valour, steadfastness, sum, excellence. Other meanings include excellence of character or mind worth merit, moral excellence, and goodness. From its genesis, all the qualities condensed in the six letter word -virtue- were a social thermometer of behavior. Virtue was only expected and recognized on the highest ranks of society.

In classical Greece virtue had more to do with a quality of the soul, it was related to the very essence of human actions, we can say there were no gender implications, even if Meno, as we will explain further on, dared to talk about a virtue of the women and a virtue of the men, an idea that was discarded by Socrates. Whereas the Latin approach is much more gender oriented, this time all attitudes and qualities of character are strictly related to the masculine gender. This is a proof of gender inequality, for these specific virtues were not recognized in women. Gender inequality refers to an imbalance in the treatment of men and women in a society; there were social expectations based on gender, and the word virtue evidences it. In ancient civilizations it

was men who were expected to do the most dangerous work, men were expected to face the dangers, and be societies' shield against any foreign harm. Hence they required all those manly virtues in order to succeed.

This gendered vision of virtue accentuates as we approach to the medieval era: women's reputation and honor was related to sexual behavior, while for men it was based on social rank, for virtue was not only based on gender, but also on social class. Hence, towards the 15<sup>th</sup> century, conduct books will be gender-based and we will repeatedly see how virtue will continue to be essentially gendered all the way to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In Western Society, it is not until the second half of the twentieth century that women will achieve again the level of freedom that they subtly experienced in the first century. It is barely in the nineteenth century that we will read about feminism and the first official movements to advocate women's rights, movements aiming to break sexist paradigms establishing that men were meant to rule and wield power, while women should comply with "their great gift from God to serve as mother of men, 'the exemplar and expounder of all noble, moral and spiritual gifts'" (Arrighi 209).

### **Plato and his vision of virtue through the mouth of Socrates**

Plato wrote many dialogues in which the main character was Socrates. Here we will only refer to one of those dialogues, *Meno*<sup>5</sup>. First, because it is where we have found a clear attempt at defining virtue and secondly, because it is one of the most important works of ancient western

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<sup>5</sup> Meno is the title of the Platonic dialogue, and also the name of its main character, the young noble man that examines with Socrates the meaning and implications of virtue.

philosophy. *Meno* is the cradle of the Platonic thinking, developed through Plato's reflections on Socratic doctrines.

In this platonic dialogue, Socrates admits to the noble young man, Meno, that he does not know what virtue is. Yet he proposes to find together the definition of such a precious word. Meno claims having the answer, and explains to Socrates that a virtuous man is he who can manage the city well, and that a virtuous woman is she who is submissive to her husband and takes good care of the household. This initial attempt on defining virtue is the first evidence of a gendered virtue; but this difference is not only based in gender, it is also societal and age based. Meno further explains:

The virtue of a child, whether male or female, is different again, and so is that of an elderly man, if you want that, or if you want that of a free man or a slave. And there are very many other virtues, so that one is not at a loss to say what virtue is. There is virtue for every action and every age, for every task of ours and every one of us. (qtd. in Sedley 61)

Nevertheless, Socrates immediately questions his friend's premise asking if this gender based differentiation is only related to virtue, or if it is also applicable for instance to health, size and strength. Meno's answer is that there is no such difference relating those characteristics.

**Socrates: When you say, Meno, that there is one virtue of a man, another of a woman, another of a child, and so on, does this apply only to virtue, or would you say the same of health, and size, and strength? Or is the nature of health always the same, whether in man or woman?**

**Meno:** I should say that health is the same, both in man and woman.

**Socrates:** And is not this true of size and strength? If a woman is strong, she will be strong by reason of the same form and of the same strength subsisting in her which there is in the



man. I mean to say that strength, as strength, whether of man or woman, is the same. Is there any difference?

Meno: I think not.

Socrates: And will not virtue, as virtue, be the same, whether in a child or in a grown-up person, in a woman or in a man?

Meno: I cannot help feeling, Socrates, that this case is different from the others.

Socrates: But why? **Were you not saying that the virtue of a man was to order a state, and the virtue of a woman was to order a house?**

Meno: I did say so.

Socrates: **And can either house or state or anything be well ordered without temperance and without justice?**

Meno: Certainly not.

Socrates: Then they who order a state or a house temperately or justly order them with temperance and justice?

Meno: Certainly.

Socrates: **Then both men and women, if they are to be good men and women, must have the same virtues of temperance and justice?**

Meno: **True.** (qtd. in Sedley 2011, my emphasis)

What would be the reason to segregate people based on gender when we talk about virtue and not when it comes to physical aptitudes? The discrimination is arbitrary and based on pre-defined social roles. In Greek civilization, as well as all civilizations that followed, men always thought the opposite sex didn't have the same qualities of mind, a biased judgment made by those who monopolized power and controlled society, men. Nevertheless, we consider Socrates' questioning Meno's approach on feminine and masculine virtue, as a way of expressing the inadequacy of a gendered virtue. The most relevant and cherished attribute of the human soul should never be determined by gender<sup>6</sup> (Jones and Preddy, "Plato")

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<sup>6</sup> Socrates will be one of the few if not the only man that we will find in this study, which stood against gender roles. In Plato's book V of *"The Republic"*, he was of the idea of giving men and women the same training in geometry,

The dialogue continues and this time Meno tells to Socrates that virtue is justice; but Socrates wisely questions him by saying: “Is it virtue, Meno, or a virtue?” The issue with virtue is that we can find many while looking for one, but we can’t find one that covers all, so there is not a real definition of virtue. Socrates seeks the nature of virtue as a whole, a definition of its essence, but all he can find is a list of attributes that are considered virtues. While trying to define it, we always arrive to the many, and although all those many are called by a name, it doesn’t mean that they are the definition.

Socrates thought all virtues were chained. Hence, once you possessed one virtue, you will automatically possess them all. Virtue was knowledge, and a path to happiness. That relationship between virtue and knowledge is clearly explained by Miller: “If one intellectually knows what is good, then he will do it: the morally correct action is the result of knowledge or of right opinion; conversely, wrong doing is the result of ignorance” (1971). The morally correct action is the virtuous action, and a virtuous action is one that is truly and essentially good, good for us and for others. Nonetheless, Socrates leaves us with no clear answer, he explains later on that virtue cannot be defined as knowledge because there are no virtue masters, no one specializes in teaching or studying virtue, and you can’t call knowledge something that you can neither study nor teach, consequently, virtue is a divine gift.

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music and arts. According to him, women were weaker than men, but they could be as useful to society as men were.

## **Aristotle, the seed of gendered virtue**

Aristotle was considered the master of ethics. On his works, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, he will pursue the analysis of virtue started by Plato.

Justice, Temperance, Strength and Prudence, were called the cardinal virtues, and they were pillar in every men's action in order to be considered virtuous. Nonetheless, the willingness to act with justice, temperance, strength or prudence could not be occasional or temporary, it needed to be authentic, the virtue needed to be an intrinsic value, an authentic knowledge of the good, a natural disposition to act in a certain way, it was thought that the soul should freely chose to live a virtuous life. The four cardinal virtues were created during this period and as we will explain further on, will be mainly if not only recognized in men. Christian philosophy will take the cardinal virtues as inspiration to create its theological virtues.

Virtue was closely related to a stable equilibrium of the soul. It had nothing to do with the body but with the soul. A virtuous life was one lived far from the extremes, a life lived in the middle of two vices, being one an excess and the other a default.<sup>7</sup> Virtue is a mean, for it aims for an intermediate, moderate action, "it is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean...this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it" (Aristotle 18). In like manner, the relevance of virtues was evident, as he would consider it merited to be praised: "Praise is appropriate to virtue, for as a result of virtue men tend to do noble deeds" (Aristotle 18).

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<sup>7</sup> Conversely to Plato, Aristotle does not talk about what is to be considered a virtuous woman, or if those virtues that he finds in men are also present in the soul of the opposite gender. As we will go further in the realm of the word virtue, we will realize that this fluctuation in meaning relating the gender, will be constant. In other words, we will see how philosophers, moralists and thinkers will alternatively talk about men's virtues and by times they will talk about women's virtues or totally omit them.

Moreover, according to Aristotle, virtues could be either intellectual or moral. Intellectual virtues are acquired, taught and one requires experience and time to obtain them. They are found, as Bonardi would explain, “*dans la partie connaissante de l’âme*”<sup>8</sup> (34). Regarding moral virtues, he explains that these are the result of habits neither acquired by nature, nor contrary to nature. Life’s objective is finding *eudaimonia*<sup>9</sup>, and being virtuous is the only way to accomplish that happiness.

An unprecedented definition of virtue as well as an increasing list of them was developed by Aristotle, but it must be noted that the philosopher was inimical to an equal treatment of virtue. Men and women could certainly attain and possess virtue, yet feminine virtues are not the same as masculine virtues. We see it clearly in his work *Politics*: “...temperance of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. And this holds of all other virtues, as will be more clearly seen if we look at them in detail...” (21).

We discover in Aristotle the root of gendered virtue, for he thought of woman as a being incapable of controlling passions and whose better assets were obedience, submission, and silence. Aristotle makes it clear when he cites a poet in his *Politics*: “Silence is a woman’s glory”<sup>10</sup>.

In a world dominated by men; slaves, women and children were considered imperfect persons. No wonder why Aristotle’s thoughts and not Socrates’ survived the Dark Ages, and

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<sup>8</sup> The side of the soul that has knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word for happiness.

<sup>10</sup> The page number for this quotation is omitted because the version of *Politics* consulted is digital and the source has no pagination.

influenced the high Middle Ages. The Peripatetic school preached and preserved Aristotle's thoughts on virtue as a temperance between opposite vices, a thought rescued and applied by Thomas Aquinas who incorporated it to the Christian moral and theology in his *Summa Theologiae*. This explains the bold discrimination between men and women in the realm of virtue during the following periods, a discrimination that surpassed the moral and reached the physical.

### ***Virtus*, a quality of Roman men**

In ancient Rome, virtue maintained its moral aspect inherited from the Greek philosophy, and added an honor facet to its bearer. It was treated as a primarily masculine feature, and according to the Oxford Latin Dictionary (1982), it was defined as the typical qualities of a true man. Such qualities were: manly spirit, resolutions, valour, steadfastness, sum, excellence; other meanings include excellence of character or mind worth merit, moral excellence, and goodness. The word in Classical Latin was *uirtūs, uirtūtis*; was a feminine term defining the most common masculine attributes. The word itself derives from *vir, viri*, meaning, hero, husband, man, a person of courage, honor and nobility, according to the William Whitaker's Word dictionary.

Virtues were then alleged as an entirely masculine strength, but McDonnell goes further, he explains that this key component of Roman men's identity, was a non-ethical component and was used exclusively to express the notion of physical courage, all throughout the Republican period and until the first-century B.C. Moreover, not all men were considered virtuous, only adult roman noble men could attain virtue (2). According to this same author, *virtus* was hardly accredited to women, due to the affinities of the word *virtus* to that of *vir*; granting women a

virtue seemed incongruous. However, *pudicita*, meaning modesty or chastity, was a virtue recognized and expected from women. *Pudicita*, had to be with the way you interacted and presented yourself with others, and this aspect would be equally applied in both genders, conversely to chastity that would be mostly for, if not exclusively to women. It is important to realize that McDonnell mentions chastity as a virtue attributed to woman in a civilization that was profoundly polytheistic. Given this point, the idea of Christianity being the origin of a gendered virtue based on sexuality loses strength. It is true that with the church playing an important role in stigmatizing women when it came to desire and pleasure, women's reputation was always preceded by their sexual behavior. But although with a different approach, it all started in the polytheistic Rome, not the Christian Rome.

Moreover, *Pudicita*, was a virtue because it opposed a vice, *impudicita*, meaning shamelessness and sexual vice that would lead to chaos and loss of control; and the reason why this virtue was highly expected mostly from women, was because Romans considered them cornerstone of the family, in spite of being a patriarchal civilization. The cult to Venus and the Vestal Virgins are confirmation of the relevance given to chastity and virginity.

The manner Romans understood virtue evidences how philosophy was subordinated to politics, after all, philosophy was monopolized by the Greek and matters of the State and the government were primordial for Romans. It is also proof manliness and strength were the cornerstone of virtue, conversely to the Greeks who talked about happiness, the golden mean and about being able to differentiate between right and wrong doing.

However, in the Rome of Cicero, in the Late Republican Rome, virtue stopped being an acquired right, in part thanks to this Roman politician and philosopher that saw virtue as a

quality that had to be earned and not inherited. Cicero raised from the lower classes and made his way to the senate in a Rome that was socially and politically turbulent and where power was the exclusive right of aristocracy; he became a *homo novus*, one that without having any politically distinguished antecessors obtained public recognition. The nobility that provided the political and military leaders to the *Res Publica*, now needed to prove their virility, their virtue, on the battlefield. The private realm was no place to prove virtue, it had to be earned and it could be lost at anytime. With this idea, Cicero widened the scope of virtue allowing it to men that earned their position by merit, the *homo novus*.

Cicero understood the importance of philosophy and dedicated part of his life to the study of Greek thinking, as well as the translation of their major works. He put philosophy at the service of politics, and he blamed the lack of virtue of the politicians of his time, for the weakening of the Republic. The only way to remediate this was, according Cicero, by having men committed to reach personal virtue and social stability instead of an insatiable thirst for fame.

Furthermore, in his treatise, *De Officiis*<sup>11</sup>, Cicero claims to be a follower of Socrates and Plato, just like the Peripatetics. He explains to his son Marcus that all that is morally correct, comes from the four sources<sup>12</sup>:

(1) the full perception and intelligent development of the true; or (2) with the conservation of organized society, with **rendering every man his due**, and with the faithful discharge of obligations assumed; or (3) with the greatness and strength of a noble and invincible spirit; or (4) with the orderliness and

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<sup>11</sup> On obligations.

<sup>12</sup> The “four sources” refer to the four cardinal virtues.

moderation of everything that is said and done, wherein consist **temperance and self-control**. (qtd. in Trucker 51, my emphasis)

Pliny the Younger developed deeper reflections regarding women's morality and virtues. Nevertheless, all definition of virtue is limited to a simple listing of adjectives, differing according to the gender. A patriarchal and gendered mentality allowed this kind of discrimination that Socrates questioned, not for its injustice, or because he was a champion of women's rights, but because of its illogical reasoning. Carlon quotes a very interesting phrase from Pliny's *Epistulaei*, in which women were proven downgraded and underestimated by men: "*gloria dignus, qui . . . uxorem quam virginem accepit, tam doctam politamque reddiderit.*"<sup>13</sup> (138). Men did not expect women to magically appear perfect and as they expected them, they had to carefully pick them and then marry them in order to train them and shape them to meet their expectations.

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<sup>13</sup> "He is deserving of glory who took a wife as a maiden and rendered her so learned and polished".



## Chapter II: Tracking Virtue through the Middle Ages

Following the fall of the Roman Empire, rises a new era; early, high and late middle ages lead us to the early modern period.<sup>14</sup> This chapter will be mainly committed to the transition of the late middle ages to the early modern period of French history. Nevertheless, earlier stages of the medieval period will be cited in order to contextualize.

In the middle ages Europe, a whole new institution of power, wealth and influence stood tall as the one and only moral authority, dominating the lives of peasants and nobles, as well as influencing the economical and political scene, this was the Holy Mother Church, cradle of Christianity. The governmental system was feudalism, and as the Church, it was deeply influenced by social hierarchies and gender. The role of women in medieval society was dictated by biblical texts emphasizing the moral authority of men over the opposite sex, “the medieval West constructed woman to be secondary in creation, and primary in guilt” (Alcuin 96). A guilt derived from their reputation of “creatures of flesh”, the Church always perceived women as a menace, for they were able to awake passion in men, and all passions were a threat to virtuosity.

Moreover, western medieval civilization was primarily patriarchal, hierarchies in the Church and social structure of feudalism were notably based on gender, the most important and influent official ranks belonged to men. As Alcuin alleges, “women were defined primarily as sexual beings (virgin, wife, widow, prostitute)” (137), emphasizing her allegations by explaining that this discriminating treatment of women will extend from the fourth century and beyond

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<sup>14</sup> Le Goff estimates that the Renaissance cannot be considered as a different period but as the last superperiod of a long middle ages. He further adds that periods should be typically marked by significant thought change (113). We estimate that the author’s point of view is accurate, for there is no significant change in the thinking between those two periods typically divided in Middle Ages and Renaissance; from the point of view of the evolution and development of a definition of virtue.

towards a profound misogyny; for instance, it was thought that although lust could strike men and women, it was more repugnant in women than in men because the origin of feminine virtue was in the sexual domain, while men were able to find various paths to reach virtue in the public life (138). This explains why all definition and attribution of feminine virtue is conditioned to sexual behavior during this period, chastity was in sum, the virtue of women.

### **The conversion of virtue to Christianity**

Notwithstanding that the cardinal virtues (Justice, Temperance, Strength and Prudence) origins was non-Christian, they were borrowed from the ancient world as a source of inspiration for the medieval thought. The list of virtues predicated by Christianity did not stray from the ancient moral philosophy, as Bonardi points out, “*Paul ne fait pas preuve d’une très grande originalité*”<sup>15</sup> (40). The Christian thought perceived virtue as a gift from God granted to both genders, and non-Christians were excluded. However, that virtue was recognized in men and women does not mean that they were both considered as equals.

According to Bonardi, the true conversion of virtues to Christianity is attributed to Augustin, he categorized virtues in Christian and pagan faiths. Augustin stated that the true virtue could not be found in those that do not possess true faith in Christ, they are excluded from

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<sup>15</sup> “Paul does not make proof of a great originality”. The apostle was considered as an authority during the early years of the Church and although he preserved in his texts the influence of ancient philosophers, he also distinguished three specific virtues, *vertus théologiques*, considered a free gift from God. These virtues were: faith, hope and charity; and as the Aristotelian thoughts on virtue, Paul considered that all virtues and all virtuous actions must be voluntary, otherwise they couldn’t be considered virtuous. “All merit, all virtue, and all guilt reside in the will, choice, purpose. If we do right, but do it unwillingly, there is no virtue in it.” (Clarke 150) What was Paul’s approach on feminine virtue? Did he considered that virtue varied depending on the gender of the individual? The medievalist Alixe Bovey, in his article “Women in medieval society” expounds that the Apostle Paul’s texts emphasized the supremacy of men over women, silence was greatly appreciated from women.

the sphere of morality for all virtues come exclusively from God. He was against the idea of *eudaimonia* as the telos of virtue, and happiness was not necessarily a consequence of being a virtuous man. Being virtuous meant to him a continual harmonizing of human activities towards love. The guidance and inspiration of all action had to be love in order to be virtuous. This general idea of virtue was applied to men, nonetheless, as it will be explained further on, Augustin specified what was to be considered a virtuous woman.

In his book, *The City of God*, Augustin suggests that there are two different virtues, one masculine and one feminine and in here as well as on his book *Confessions*, he gives a list of virtues expected from women. Nonetheless, neither book gives a clear definition of this virtues, but he is very descriptive of his perception on women. Augustine's thoughts on feminine virtue can be found mainly on Sermon 9, and in the same way Pliny the Younger<sup>16</sup> did, he subordinates woman to men, if women are virtuous it is because men guide them:

You are told, 'You shall not commit adultery' (Ex 20: 14); that is, do not go to any other woman except your wife. But what you do is demand this duty from your wife, while declining to pay this duty to your wife. And while you ought to lead your wife in virtue - chastity is a virtue, you know - you collapse under one assault of lust. You want your wife to conquer; you yourself lie there, conquered. And while you are the head of your wife, she goes ahead of you to God, she whose head you are. Do you want your household to hang head downwards 'The husband is the head of the wife' (Eph 5: 23); but where the wife leads a better life than the husband, the household hangs head downwards. (261)

This sermon sets the husband as the only role model for his wife while he leads a life stained with sins, he can neither expect nor demand anything different from his spouse. The virtues recognized in women by Augustine are submissive virtues, as they are expected to be

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter I.

obedient Christians, accept not only God's authority but also that of men, they were also expected to possess motherly love and to be faithful. Augustine saw in his mother the perfect example of a virtuous woman, in book nine of *Confessions*, he paid her the highest compliments by comparing her faith and Christian piety to those of a man: "My mother was also with us – in woman's garb, but with a man's faith, with the peacefulness of age and the fullness of motherly love and Christian piety". A man was virtuous to Augustine insofar as his actions relied on love and a woman was virtuous as long as she was submissive to her husband and God.

Another father of the Church who stood on the field of virtues was Thomas of Aquinas, to whom was recognized the reconciliation between Aristotelian and Augustinian thoughts on virtue. Thomas of Aquinas gave a sense to men's actions saying that grace came as a gift from God, but this gift needed to be improved through virtuosity in order to be granted access to paradise. Moreover, men are called to stay true to his faith and stay away from desires that could distract them from his path.

The most relevant work of Aquinas was his *Summa Theologiae*, in which he refers to virtue more than a thousand times. Thus, as it happened during antiquity in the works of Greek and Latin philosophers, there is no precise and univoque definition of virtue. However, Bonardi expounds in a clear manner that englobes the many ideas, how Aquinas envisages virtue from an Aristotelian perspective; in life there are *habitus* and among them there are good and bad. Good *habitus* were considered virtues, they aim perfection and goodness; while bad *habitus* were all the vices (42).

Moreover, this father of the Church stated in his works that virtues can be theological or moral. Theological virtues are grace infused virtues, and they are obtained in a life of grace, in

this order men and women are equals. Conversely, moral virtues are acquired by men and woman according to their deeds in the life of the natural order, were they are dissimilar. Both genders can have the same infused virtue because acquiring them does not rely on them, in fact it is God through his power that imparts it. Nonetheless, the acquired virtues, that are a consequence of their acts.<sup>17</sup>

Thus far, Aquinas introduces his theory of a gendered virtue, but he had to find a way to explain this discrimination because his thought was not only inspired by Aristotle's philosophy but also by the Sacred Scriptures. Consequently, stating that women were imperfect was in a certain way acknowledging that God, maker of men and woman, created something imperfect and that was not possible. That is why Aquinas explained that there are exceptions and that women could excel in the realm of virtue, more specifically, theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. An example of a virtuous woman was Mary Mother of God, along with other biblical women that followed God's will (Gross 26). The negative perception of women was erased from the Virgin Mary; since she was the mother of Christ, she stood as a testimony of hope and salvation for Christians and also as the model of devoted motherhood and chastity.

According to Aquinas cardinal virtues<sup>18</sup>: prudence, temperance, justice and strength were by default the virtue of men. In this realm women had almost no chance because of their

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<sup>17</sup> For more information about this matter see "Disputed questions on virtue" in Aquinas, Thomas; Eisen Murphy, Claudia (2010). Even though the different approaches on virtue are central to this work, for its purposes it is not necessary to fully analyze and explain all the moral theories on virtue but only give to the reader a concise idea of how virtue was defined and if it was a gendered definition.

<sup>18</sup> Also named moral or acquired virtues.

weakness and tendency to fall for passions<sup>19</sup>, they are not completely banned from obtaining these virtues, it is just more difficult for them than for men and if they do succeed, their virtue will be of a lesser degree.<sup>20</sup> As Gross clearly explains: “women’s ability to acquire virtue is inhibited, because their passions frequently overwhelm their reason” (29).

### **Medieval conduct literature**

Literature offering guidelines on how to socially behave was not a medieval invention, in fact, Greek and Roman civilizations based education and social roles in genders and it was not very different during medieval times. Thus, there were conduct books addressed to each gender and translated into a different scale of virtues for men and women. Dronzek gives four different reasons why men and women were not expected to be taught the same things: they learn in different contexts, they absorb information differently, they are physically dissimilar and their honor is grounded in different principles. According to her, female learning is focused on embodied honor; while male’s learning is based on abstract honor (135). Both genders were instructed on what was to be expected from them; thus, women were given guidance relating the household activities, their marriage, their social behavior and moral; men were instructed on economics, politics, and morals, among others. Women had always carried with the stigma of their sexual behavior as their honor and reputation was always strictly related to it; as for the opposite gender, virtues were never based or in anyway related to their sexuality.

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<sup>19</sup> This weakness attributed to women comes from the Biblical scriptures. Adam’s rib was the raw material to create Eve. According to the Bible, Eve was created from Adam's rib and, having eaten the forbidden fruit, was responsible for man's expulsion from paradise. In medieval art, the responsibility of women for this 'original sin', is often emphasized by giving a female head to the serpent who tempts Eve to disobey God. The story underlined the belief that women were inferior to men, and that they were morally weaker and likely to tempt men into sin.

<sup>20</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, the place of women in society was often dictated by biblical texts.

This gendered literature allows us to have an insight on gender roles throughout history, because they were written with the sole intention of systematizing genders behavior in medieval society. They thrived in the later Middle Ages and made their way to the early modern period in France, Germany, Italy and England; in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they fall in disuse and were replaced by novels, the literary genre by excellence. Feudalism was the political system by the time and it implied a patriarchal governance not only of society but also of female conduct (Ashley and Clark 10).

Conduct books were primarily addressed to women and generally written by men. Hence, gender role was a subject dominated by fathers and husbands who would guide them. During the fifteenth century, Geoffroy V de la Tour Landry wrote *Le livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles*<sup>21</sup>, the author explains the purpose of the manual: "...*qui fut fait pour l'enseignement des femmes mariées et à marier.*"<sup>22</sup> Geoffroy V lists a series of situations and how should women behave in every case. For instance, the second chapter explains what a girl should do when she wakes up; the tenth chapter is dedicated to explain how all women ought to be courteous.

In this book feminine virtues can be found, but there is no reference to masculine virtues. This characteristic was noticed in the two other conduct books that will be expounded further on. This particularity responds to the early thought inherited from the ancient philosophers as well as the fathers of the Church, who considered that virtue had to be inculcated to women; while men were virtuous or became virtuous by their own actions.

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<sup>21</sup> "The book of the Knight of the Landry Tower for the teaching of his daughters". The author started writing this book and finished it in 1372.

<sup>22</sup> "... that was made for the education of married women and those to be married."

The first mention concerning virtue is made in chapter nine, Geoffrey V states that fasting is a very convenient virtue because it softens and refreshes the flesh, keeping away the bad will. However, it is not to all women that he proposes this virtue as a way to approach the grace of God, the author specifies that it is expected especially from virgins and widows: “*Et pour ce, mes belles filles, jeune est une abstinence et vertu moult convenable et qui adoulcist et reffransit la char des mauvaises volentéz, et humilie le cuer et empètre grace vers Dieu, dont toutes jeunes femmes, et especiaulment les pucelles et les veuves, doivent jeuner...*”<sup>23</sup> This abstinence is convenient because young virgins are encouraged to give up on the desires of the flesh and stay virgins for their future husbands; in the case of widows to stay faithful to their defunct husbands.

Furthermore, Geoffroy V indicates to his daughters that curtesy and humility are the most beautiful virtues that a girl can possess, for they are agreeable in the eyes of God and they will allow them to succeed in friendship and love, as he states in chapter 10: “*Après, mes belles filles, gardez que vous soies courtoises et humbles, car il n'est nulle plus belle vertu, ne qui tant attrait à avoir la grace de Dieu et l'amour de toutes gens, que ester humbles et courtoises...*”<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, in chapter ninety-seven *De la royne Hester*, he sets as an example of virtuous women, the Queen Hester, wife to the King of Surye, and describes her as a good and wise dame. This queen embodied three appreciated virtues: love, fear and shame and he explains what is their use. Conversely to the other authors presented in this thesis, Geoffroy V qualifies as virtues two

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<sup>23</sup> “And because of that, my beautiful girls, fasting is an abstinence and a very convenient virtue that softens and refreshes the chair from the bad will, makes you humble and demands the grace of God. All young women and specially the virgins and the widows have to fast.”

<sup>24</sup> “After all, my beautiful girls, stay courteous and humble, because there is no better virtue to gain the grace of God and the love of all people than staying courteous and humble.”



negative feelings, fear and shame. “*Ces III vertus la maistroient; car l’amour qu’elle avoit à son seigneur la gardoit de lui faire son deplaisir; paour la destraingnoit de perdre son honneur et de faire pechié, fors le moins qu’elle pouvoit; honte d’avoir viliain reproche.*”<sup>25</sup>

In this way he defines virtues from a negative approach, in other words, a virtuous woman is one who is afraid of losing her honor and fall into temptation. The honor of a women is defined by her chastity and virginity; therefore, these are virtues as well as the dread of loosing them.

In like manner, twenty-two years later (1394), a Parisian bourgeois published *Le Ménagier the Paris, traité de morale et d’économie domestique*<sup>26</sup>, addressed to young women with instructions on how to behave with their husbands and how to execute domestic labors.

*Le Ménagier*, advocates seven virtues in a way that recalls Aristotle’s definition of virtue as a quality opposing vice. Thus, the seven virtues were humility, friendship, good nature, diligence, generosity, temperance<sup>27</sup> and chastity; and they opposed in the same order their seven correlative vices, pride, envy, rage, laziness, avarice, gluttony, lust. The seven virtues are remedies to the seven sins according to the author, but women were expected to truly possess them, otherwise they were labeled as hypocrites, meaning they pretend to be replenished of virtues when it is not true. Thus, hypocrisy was not appreciated for it was considered vain glory and did not please God.

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<sup>25</sup> “This III virtues gave her a certain control; because the love that she professed to her lord protected her from displeasing him; fear kept her from loosing her honor and sin ...”

<sup>26</sup> “The household of Paris, a moral and household arts treaty”

<sup>27</sup> In the book, the French word used to name this virtue was *sobriété*. It is important to highlight that *sobriété* (sobriety) in the sense of general moderation does not appear until the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Littré dictionary. Hence, until then, the meaning of this word was that indicated in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, temperance in eating and drinking. This explains why the counterpart to this virtue is the vice of gluttony.

Until now, the link between gender and virtue in these conduct manual is understated, but *Le Ménagier* presents a straightforward definition of virtue –goods of grace given by God to men and women- and reminds the reader that although he is listing feminine virtues, men are also granted *les biens de grâce*, which are virtues:

Dieu a donné à homme et à femme, c'est assavoir les biens de nature, les biens de fortune et les biens de grâce. Les biens de nature viennent du corps et sont beauté, bonté, bon langage, bon sens pour entendre, bon engin pour retenir. Les biens de fortune sont richesses, haultesses, honneurs et prospérités; et **les biens de grâce sont vertus** et bonnes œuvres (30).<sup>28</sup>

At this point, all authors mentioned were men giving their point of view on women's behavior and virtue. In search of a feminine perspective, Christine de Pizan emerges amid male-authored conduct book; a women of letters, she was a member of the Parisian court of King Charles V who raised her voice and gave advice to those of her own gender to vindicate their right to virtuosity in: *La cité des dames* and *Le livre des trois vertus*.<sup>29</sup>

In *La cité des dames*, the author allegorically builds a city that could only be inhabited by virtuous women and outside the walls of that city would be left all those lacking virtue. She aimed to prove wrong misogynic thoughts of the epoch, that labeled all women as naturally vicious, virtuous women were not inexistent but hard to find. As it has been explained previously, women's virtuosity relied mostly on the guidance of men, or they would earn it by themselves, but it was a considered a herculean task, for women are nothing but slaves of

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<sup>28</sup> “God has given to men and women the goods of the nature, the goods of fortune and the goods of grace. The goods of the nature come from the body and are beauty, goodness, good disposition, good sense to understand, ingenuity to remember. The goods of fortune are wealth, honors and prosperity; and the goods of grace are the virtues and good works”.

<sup>29</sup> See introduction in Brown's *Christine the Pizan and the moral defense of women*.

passions. Christine de Pizan defended feminine virtue by presenting them as capable of having intellectual and moral virtue as men do.

In order to justify gender equality in the realm of virtue, she inspires her work in theology. Christina's *Cité des dames* is compared to Aquinas's *Cité de Dieu*, the habitants are different, the requisites to enter each city were different, but the justification regarding the possibility of men and women having the same virtues was identical. Thomas of Aquinas and Christina de Pizan, depart from the principle that men and women are equals in the eyes of God, and that Mother Mary is a strong and undeniable evidence of feminine virtue.

Nonetheless, Christine recognizes that although capable, some women just lack virtue and disregarding their social condition, civil status or level of education, she gives them advice and the possibility of becoming virtuous and getting access to the *cit  *. She encourages women to attract virtue and scape vices in order to expand and multiply the city inhabitants: "*Et ainsi vous plaise, mes tres redoubtees, par les vertus attraire et fouyr les vices, acroistre et mouteplier nostre cit  , vous resjouyr et bien faire*" (qtd. in Zhang, *L'id  e de 'deux cit  s'*). In the same way, she categorically rejects women who do not reach virtue by stating that "*...celles ou vertu ne sera trouvee, les murs de nostre cit   seront forclos*" (*ibid.*)

But which were the feminine virtues according to Christine de Pizan? In fact, there is not such thing as a list of virtues in *La cit   des dames*, nonetheless it is implied that all virtues attributed to men and listed by Greek and Latin philosophers, as well as those listed by the fathers of the Church, were also attributable to women. As Green explained: "...her City of Ladies is not conservative: it does not ignore all moral

philosophy and reduce virtue to a gift of grace which female believers are capable of receiving just as well as men” (11).

Equally important to *La cité des dames* was the *Livre des trois vertus* conceived as a conduct book, in which Christine de Pizan educates and gives advice to women of her time on how to behave. Schaus affirms that this was “the first female-authored conduct book for lay women, and one of the first books to offer specific counsel to women of each social class” (161).

Unlike the first book, in *Livre des trois vertus*, a list of virtues is given by the author; in fact, the title is inspired on the following virtues: *raison, droiture et justice*.<sup>30</sup> The three virtues guided her and explained how she would build her *cité*, a place to protect and receive all honorable women. The list of virtues is exhaustive: purity, patience, modesty, piety, courage, humility, and so on.

The virtuous endeavors recommended were supposed to give women access to Christine’s city and she encouraged women to prove men wrong when accusing them of being vicious and weak, by showing them their virtues. The nineteenth chapter of the book serves as a recapitulation of all virtues expected from women, and she addressed to each one of them explaining on which virtues they should rely in order to defend themselves from the enemy. She addressed young women, widows, virgins, women

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<sup>30</sup> Reason, righteousness and justice.

married to good husbands and to those married to bad husband. In sum, she addressed all women with a clear message:

Enfin, vous toutes, mesdames, femmes de grande, de moyenne ou d'humble condition, avant toute chose restez sur vos gardes et soyez vigilantes pour vous défendre contre les ennemis de votre honneur et de votre vertu. Voyez, chères amies, comme de toutes parts ces hommes vous accusent des pires défauts !

Furthermore, Christine proposes the practice of the “virtuous hypocrisies”, an avant-garde idea that proposed a divorce between *l'être et le paraître*<sup>31</sup>. Sharon explains that this virtuous hypocrisies are “displays of charity, loyalty, and affection toward people for whom one may feel open hostility, not solely for self-benefit, but for the stability of the realm and edification of observers who will be moved to imitate and promote these qualities” (86).

Furthermore, Sharon clarifies that this was not applicable to chastity, a virtue that implied a relationship with God; hence it had to be sincere. The mask of “virtuous hypocrisies” was to be used by princesses who needed to maintain their reputation, total sincerity was not affordable to them, not only for the sake of their people but also for they own sake (*ibid.*).

Christine proposed what years before was rejected and qualified as hypocrisy in the book of *Le Ménagier de Paris*; thus, pretending to have the seven virtues when you really didn't, was a shameful and deceivous practice according to the author. Nevertheless, Christine saw in this practice a shield that protects women from provocation and it would only be applied to certain virtues and in certain contexts.

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<sup>31</sup> *L'être et le paraître* is a subject dear to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual elite. This double edged vision of Christine de Pizan on virtue, as well as her will to reach all audiences of women, make her the visionary of her time.

The relevance of this author in the tracking of virtue relies on how her work diverges from other conduct manuals written by male authors because:

It teaches the readers first, how to use their rationality to overcome the temptations of the body; secondly, how to gain maximum credit for their virtuous conduct in the eyes of the world; and thirdly, how to avoid falling into the misogynist stereotype of woman as lascivious adulteress. (Brown 214)

Christine de Pizan defended women's capacity to achieve and hold virtues that were considered as especially, if not exclusively, masculine. She was a contra resting force against the sexist teaching of the clergyman that filled the mind of young disciples with misogynist thoughts. Moreover, Christine de Pisan in her *Œuvres Poétiques*, defends the good treatment of men towards women basing her arguments on the fact that all women are mothers to men, thus, they have to be soft hearted towards them: "*Car tout home doit avoir le cuer tender envers femme qui a tout home est mère...*"(35)

In sum, all three conduct books here presented were written for the same audience. Focusing on their approach to virtue, it has been found that only one of them merely proposed a definition of virtue, and it is indeed a generic definition of virtue, applicable to men and women. This leads to the belief that virtue was not a gendered term per se. If we follow the definition given by *Le Ménagier*, virtue, disregarding the gender, was a good of grace gifted by God. The discrimination based on gender is present every time a virtue is listed and attributed exclusively to men or women, although in some cases some virtues apply to both genders.

### **Chapter III: Virtue in Early Modern France.**

The beginning of the Early Modern Period in France is pointed by Cobban, approximately by the 16<sup>th</sup> century and declines towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which is known as *le siècle des lumières*, the age of enlightenment. During this period feudalism as political regime comes to an end and an absolute monarchy is installed. While the political panorama experienced major changes, the social aspect regarding class and gender experienced a slower evolution.

In fact, the attitude and mentality towards women did not drastically change from a period to another. The medieval mentality inherited from ancient civilizations remained intact, for men were the undisputed authority in leading society, they were head of the church, head of the government and head of the household. Furthermore, the Renaissance paid tribute to the ancient philosophers and their thought in which it was rooted, and just as Insdorf reminds us, “no writer would allow himself to display his talents without showing his debt to the venerated names of the past” (31). However, things gradually changed and the number of authors defending women’s role in society increased as well as the claiming of women’s equality to men.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the opinion that different authors had vis-à-vis the definition of virtue. Due to the limited scope of this research, we will restrain the number of authors, but it is to be clarified that the list of works containing a judgment on virtue is abundant and varied. Firstly, the meaning of virtue will be tracked on different early modern dictionaries in order to evidence not only the fluctuation of its meaning but also of its gendered nature. The dictionaries that will be here mentioned are as follows: *Le Thresor de la langue françoise de Jean Nicot* (1537), *Le Dictionnaire Richelet* (1680), *Le Dictionnaire de Furetière* (1690) and the first, fourth, fifth and sixth editions of *Le Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*. These

dictionaries go from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the 18<sup>th</sup>, allowing to better understand the reasoning behind the word virtue every time it is used in this period. This was not possible in earlier periods in which there is no written recompilation of all the possible senses of the word.

Secondly, we will analyze the views of Montaigne and his *fille d'alliance* Marie de Gournay. As it was indicated before, the number of authors that wrote on this subject is not limited to these two authors. Nonetheless, they were chosen because Montaigne followed the philosophers of antiquity, which lead him to a phobic perception of women and their intellectual capacities. Nevertheless, his perception changed when he met, in his fifties, Marie de Gournay, an assiduous champion of women.

### **The dictionaries of the past and the evolution of the definition of virtue**

The dictionary of Jean Nicot (published in 1537), as all bilingual dictionary directly gives the Latin word for virtue, which is *uirtūs*. Earlier in this work, the Latin connotation of the word virtue was explained as a feminine word denoting men attributes such as manly spirit, valour, steadfastness, among others. Additionally, it presents a series of phrases in French linking virtue and the different kinds of virtues, but it never talks about it as a feminine quality. This absence of a phrase connecting women and virtue is a clear exclusion of the weak gender. In this case the dictionary reflects the spirit of its epoch relating to women.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century did not recognize virtue as an attributable quality to women and it is confirmed by Marie de Gournay's who repeatedly denounced this in the preface to the posthumous edition of Montaigne's *Essais* and more extensively in her book, *Grief des Dames*.



It is known that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the French language experimented a flowering and refinement thanks to the desire of enhancement. The salon of Mme de Rambouillet, as well as the creation of the *Académie française* are considered the main factors that contributed to the finesse of the language. Nonetheless, the dictionary of César-Pierre Richelet, as well as that of Furetière, were published before and were seen as rivals (Britannica, “French Literature”).

*Le Richelet* (published in 1680) gives an Aristotelian definition of virtue, by indicating that it is the habit of the will governed by the reason, the righteousness of the soul, “*Habitude de la volonté gouvernée par la raison. Droiture de l’âme*”. Moreover, it lists all the different categories of virtues, namely, intellectual virtues, moral virtues, cardinal virtues as well as all the “sub-virtues” that conform to these categories. This dictionary not only takes the philosophers lists of virtues, but it also refers to the Latin sense of virtue, which was that of strength, power, as it explains, physical aptitudes. Nonetheless, the physical aspect of virtue in women, which is chastity, is not directly mentioned, yet it should be implied because this was a cherished feminine characteristic in the Christian mentality. Finally, it can be found that virtuosity in women is considered a possibility since the dictionary presents the word virtuous as applicable to both genders.

*Le Furetière* (published in 1690), when defining virtue, this dictionary gives a rich explanation on how virtue is the strength of the body as well as of the soul; there is no reference to chastity or to feminine virtue. It is necessary to go to the next word entry, that of the word virtuous, which is presented as an adjective that can be attributed to both genders. However, it is relevant to mention here that the meaning of virtuosity given in this dictionary is as follows: “*Vertueux, euse. Adj. Qui a de la force & de la vigueur. Ce vieillard est encore bien vertueux à*

*son âge.*” Meaning that a virtuous men or women is that who posses strength and vigor. This dictionary of the seventeenth century introduces an approach to woman that is unprecedented. It has been showed that this physical attitude has never been given nor recognized to woman and in here it was proposed that in fact, women could possess that strength that in general had been exclusively attributed to men. Is not to be forgotten Socrates’ reflections on how virtue should be treated and defined as any other adjective, giving a general and gender neutral definition.

Finally, *Le Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, in its first edition (1694) as well as in the fourth (1762), proposes for the first time a direct reference to chastity as virtue. Chastity is regrouped with two other virtues, humility and continence; virtues commonly recognized as feminine. Likewise, in both editions the phrases *homme the haute vertu* and *femme de haute vertu*<sup>32</sup>, are present, implying that both can host virtue, but each one in its own style. Preceding these definitions are three other virtues regrouped: efficacy, rigor and strength, all masculine virtues. The fifth edition of 1798, introduces a minimal but significant modification, the phrase *femme de haute vertu* disappears. This change can be interpreted as a retaliation against women, meaning they are capable of virtue but not of the highest virtues, for these are reserved to men.<sup>33</sup> Bredin, un des *Immortels* of *L’Académie française*, points these same omissions of women as beings of high virtue in the seventh edition of the dictionary; in this regard, he says: “*l’homme de grande, de haute vertu restait seul en place ; la femme ainsi qualifiée un siècle plus tôt avait disparu, sans doute trop occupée par ses tâches domestiques, ou trop naturellement vertueuse*

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<sup>32</sup> Man of high virtue and woman of high virtue.

<sup>33</sup> To see all meanings of the word virtue in all the editions of the dictionary cited here, see: <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdicollook.pl?strippedhw=vertu>

*pour servir d'exemple dans un dictionnaire.*"<sup>34</sup> This evidences that, contrary to the common belief, women's vindications through history were not progressive, at least not in what concerns virtue.

The sixth edition of the dictionary of *l'Académie* published in 1835 adds two new elements to its previous edition, reinforcing the idea of a retaliating and misogynistic definition of virtue: "*VERTU se prend quelquefois dans le sens particulier de Chasteté, pudicité; et il ne se dit guère qu'en parlant Des femmes...Sa laideur est le garant de sa vertu.*"<sup>35</sup> Ugliness as an assurance of female chastity, a thought that reinforces and evidences the reminiscence of the Christian treaties that alleged women's body and beauty as a source of lust and temptation, labeling them as instruments of the devil guided by passions.

In the mentioned editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, virtue being gendered is a constant. The Academy was established by Cardinal Richelieu, who was undoubtedly champion of political virtues and man's leadership: "*Le gouvernement du royaume requiert une vertu mâle et une fermeté inébranlable contraire à la mollesse...*"<sup>36</sup> (Richelieu, qtd in Bouniol 160). The close reading to the different meanings of virtue gives the evidence of its uneven progression regarding gender equality.

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<sup>34</sup> "The man 'of the great virtue' stays alone in place; the woman likewise qualified a century earlier had disappeared, maybe busy with the household duties, or naturally too virtuous to serve as an example in a dictionary."

<sup>35</sup> Virtue is sometimes taken in the sense of chastity, modesty, and it is said when talking about women...women's ugliness is the assurance of her virtue".

<sup>36</sup> The government of the kingdom requires a male virtue and an unbreakable steadiness, contrary to softness...

### Montaigne and Gournay: defense of women.

In the sixteenth century, Montaigne wrote his major work, *Essais*, in which he explains what would be the ideal intellectual and physical education for girls and boys. The work of Montaigne served as a guide to educate young nobles, in fact, the XXVI essay of the first volume is dedicated to the son of a noble woman (Lagarde et Michard 208). He also consecrates the integrity of chapter nine to his thoughts on virtue as a purpose of the soul. Montaigne's thoughts on virtue and education were gendered. On chapter thirty-five, entitled *De trois bonnes femmes*, Montaigne tells the story of three women in order to set examples of what was a good wife. The virtues expected from them were loyalty and obedience. Referring to one of the couples that he uses to set an example, he states in his *Essais*: "*En ce dernier couple, cela est encore digne d'estre considéré, que Paulina offre volontiers à quitter la vie pour l'amour de son mary, et que son mary avoit autrefois quitté aussi la mort pour l'amour d'elle* (1998)."<sup>37</sup> Like his predecessors, Montaigne subordinates women's actions to the benefice of their husbands; hence, in a gracious and considerate exchange, men will defeat with bravura all perils and obstacle in order to always be there as guidance.

In sum, Montaigne's views on virtue are certainly gendered, because how he refers to it differently depends on the person's gender. Nonetheless, he is considered a skeptical, because he replaced the manly martial virtues characteristic of his epoch, for the new men's virtues of gentleness, openness and compromise, which he recognized in himself (Edelman, Montaigne).

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<sup>37</sup> The last couple, is worthy of consideration, as Paulina willingly offers to put an end to her life in order to preserve the love of her husband, and that her husband had also once defeated death to keep her love.

Furthermore, in the last chapter, “*De l’expérience*” Montaigne defines virtue as follows: “*La douleur, la volupté, l’amour, la haine, sont les premières choses, que sent un enfant : si la raison survenant elles s’appliquent à elle : cela c’est vertu (710).*”<sup>38</sup> In other words, there is virtue when the feelings are reasoned. This thought falls in the ancient philosophies that stated that a virtuous life is lived far from passions, defeating them; this reasoning of Montaigne is thus an evidence of the admiration he praised to the Ancient philosophers.

Marie de Gournay was a French author to whom has been attributed a change of Montaigne’s severe thoughts regarding women. The female-author met Montaigne when the moralist was in his fifties, and soon gained his appreciation as he welcomed her in his bosom as his *filles d’alliance* (Insdorf 59). Marie’s alliance and close friendship to Montaigne gave her a voice in a society in which women’s intellectual capacity was repeatedly underestimated and marginalized. Hence, the posthumous edition of Montaigne’s *Essais* (1595), served as a stage to her claims as she cleverly expresses in its preface: “*Bienheureux es-tu, lecteur, si tu n’es point de ce sexe, qu’on interdit de tous les biens, l’interdisant de la liberté : [...] afin de lui constituer pour seule félicité, pour vertus souveraines et seules, l’ignorance, la servitude et la faculté de faire le sot*” (qtd in Noiret, 72)<sup>39</sup>; she used this same words to introduce the reader to her work *Grief des Dames* (1626). What Marie de Gournay is implying is that virtue is, according to the society of her time, a non-existent quality for women as it is forbidden to the gender; only those

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<sup>38</sup> “Pain, sensuousness, love, hatred, these are the first things that an infant feel: once comes the age of reason, if they apply to it: this is virtue”

<sup>39</sup> “Blessed are you, reader, if thou are not from that sex, to which we prohibit all goods, banning it from freedom [...] in order to grant them as unique happiness, and as sovereign and exclusive virtues, ignorance, servitude and the faculty of make a fool out of themselves”

who are lucky enough to be men can be subjects of such appreciated quality. Her claiming for equality was in all possible field, she proposed equivalence of rights in politics, public office, education, and even regarding the definition virtue. She opposed subordination and servitude of women to men, as it was nothing but a consequence of ignorance and prejudice. Two of Marie's works are major treatises on gender equality: *L'égalité des hommes et des femmes* and *Grief des dames*<sup>40</sup>.

Regarding virtue, Marie's reflections are much more numerous and clear than those of his champion, Montaigne. Furthermore, her thought vis-à-vis virtue breaks the common position of 17<sup>th</sup> century writers, such as La Rochefoucauld, who saw virtue as a fountain of poison and hypocrisy, because it was nothing but a vice in disguise. Marie's opposition to see virtue as a way of tromperie, reminds Christine de Pizan's idea of 'Virtuous hypocrisies', with the difference that she, conversely to Marie de Gournay, supported this tactic for specific scenarios.

According to Marie de Gournay, the most valuable possession of men and women was virtue. She consecrates her whole treaty, *L'égalité des hommes et des femmes*, not only to proclaim women's equality to men, but also to justify and explain to men why it is outrageous and foolish to mistreat and underestimate women. The fact that God put men as head and master of women, does not give them the right to take away women's dignity. Gournay's arguments on gender equality relies on the Sacred Scriptures, in *L'égalité des hommes et des femmes*, she cited Saint Basile's words on how men and women are equals in virtue for they are both God's creation: "*La vertu de l'homme & de la femme est mesme chose, puis que Dieu leur a decerné*

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<sup>40</sup> The Equality of Men and Women(1622) and Ladies Grievance (1626)

*mesme creation & mesme honneur: mafculum & fæminam fecit eos*<sup>41</sup> (19). Gournay's thought was humanistic, she believed that education equality between genders was the best weapon to fight misogyny. Humanism claimed reason as the most effective way to lead people's lives, leaving aside divine matters that blind the spirit.

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<sup>41</sup> "The virtue of men and women are the same thing, for God created both and gave them both the same honor: He created male and female."

## Chapter IV: The Age of Enlightenment

The 18<sup>th</sup> century is the age of reason and enlightenment: a new philosophy is incubated in the mind of the thinkers. All intellectual production was rooted on a profound rationalism; thus, all political and religious dogma are left in the past. As it can be deduced from the previous chapters, despite its natural fluctuation of sense and meaning, virtue had always been at the mercy of politics and religion.

Regarding genders, it is known that this century follows the exact same pattern of the previous ones, meaning that male and female expectation on social behavior were clearly determined. With the purpose of determining in what measure this new current changed the general concept of virtue, and more specifically, what was the approach towards gendered virtue, two authors were chosen: François Fénelon, the royal tutor of the court of Louis XIV, and at the very heart of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the most influential thinkers of the French Enlightenment.

François Fénelon's *Les aventures de Télémaque*<sup>42</sup> (1699) was a didactic novel for its pupil, the Duke of Bourgogne, in which he included the teaching of virtue. He additionally claims private life as a less difficult environment to achieve virtuosity, it is not in court life where we can achieve it but in the calm and correctness of private life. This idea is completely opposite to Cicero's thoughts, as it was explained in the first chapter of this thesis: the private realm was no place to prove virtue, it had to be earned by merit in the battlefield.

In the integrality of his work, the word virtue is mentioned two hundred and five times, and not a single time he mentions what are these virtues, he just expounds how it is necessary

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<sup>42</sup> The Adventures of Telemachus.



that they be part of a men's life. Men must prefer virtue over a long life, because a long life without virtue is miserable and not worth living, as he wrote: "*Si les dieux ont pitié de nous, ils sauront bien nous délivrer; s'ils veulent nous laisser périr, nous serons en mourant les victimes de la vérité, et nous laisserons aux hommes l'exemple de préférer la vertu sans tache à une longue vie...*"<sup>43</sup> (22).

As it was mentioned before, gender education was taken seriously during this century, but conversely to previous ones, that were also gendered, misogyny during the eighteenth century intensified. In his book *De l'éducation pour les filles*, Fénelon made a more profound reflection on virtue, he thought that contrary to the common belief, women needed to be educated. Mothers were wrong to think that girls had to be less educated than boys, when in fact both genders are required to be educated for the sake of society. But here comes the discrimination again, when he further explains that this education has to be different, for men and women serve different roles in society. The education of men has as main objective, that they serve the State, while girl's education aims to making them able to satisfy their husbands and accomplish the household's labor. Hence, the word "educate" is not the most correct, Fenelon's idea on women's education seems more like a simple training; and to reinforce this idea, the following words of the author suit perfectly: "*Pour les filles, dit'on, il ne faut pas qu'elles soient savanets...*"<sup>44</sup> (*De l'éducation des Filles*). Nevertheless, men's education and women's training had the same importance to society and in the same way, virtue, as a general quality, had the same value in both genders: "*...les occupations des femmes, qui ne sont guère*

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<sup>43</sup> "If the gods have mercy on us, they will deliver us; if they want to let us perish, dying we will be victims of the truth, and we will set to men the example of preferring an immaculate virtue over a long life..."

<sup>44</sup> "In what concerns girls, we say, that it is not necessary that they are savant"

*moins importantes au public que celles des hommes, puisqu'elles ont une maison à régler, un mari à rendre heureux, des enfants à bien élever. Ajoutez que la vertu n'est pas moins pour les femmes que pour les hommes...*"<sup>45</sup> This allows to apply all virtues of this century to both genders with no distinction, the key thought being the field in which those virtues will be practiced. Women will be virtuous in the realm of the private sphere, and men in the realm of the public sphere. Fenelon's considerations on gender equality are rooted in the belief of God being the creator of both.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or how Joseph Reiser names him, "the friend of virtue" (1), is considered one of the most relevant figures of his century due to his contribution to moral philosophy that influenced intellectuals at a later time. *Émile* and *Eloise* are considered major works of the author, and in both the reflections on virtue are rich; it is appropriate to cite once more the word of Reiser, who manages to summarize the structure of Rousseau's work revolving around virtue:

Virtue is the central lesson of Rousseau's constructive works; it is the link that connects the 'individualistic' teaching of *Emile* and *Julie* with the 'collectivistic' doctrines of *On the Social Contract* and the *Discourse on Political Economy*. Although *Julie* always professes to love virtue, she does not initially live up to the ideals she professes; she experiences a dramatic conversion on her wedding day, however, and cleaves steadfastly to virtue thereafter. Virtue is also the culminating lesson of *Emile's* education. In the course of the young man's upbringing, Jean-Jacques gives only one simple but comprehensive moral precept to his protégé: 'Be a man' (*sois homme*). In context, it is clear that this means: 'be virtuous' (21)

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. "...women's occupations, that are in no way less important to society than those of men, because they have a house to rule, a husband to make happy, and kids that she had to raise well. Add to this that virtue is not less to women than to men..."

Thus, Rousseau believed in virtue as a quality existent in both genders, it is yet to be determined if they were interpreted and defined in the same way or if there is any basis for discrimination. In the preface of *Émile*, the author explains that his work was a recompilation of reflections and observations on education; he clarifies that his objective is not do what everyone else did already, which is talk about the importance of a good education, or qualify as good or bad the educative methods (6). As it has been commonly observed, Rousseau makes comments on virtue and how it is presented in his imaginary pupil's life; nonetheless, he does not clearly explain to him what is virtue, he just name attitudes that are listed as virtues, namely, steadiness and firmness. Regardless the absence of a concise definition, he clarifies that boys between the age of two and twelve should not be taught virtue, instead their heart should be protected from vice and their spirits from mistake. He considered that boys of this age were not ready to understand the greatness of virtue. It is between the ages of fifteen and twenty – when they pass from childhood to puberty – that men are to be taught virtues and encouraged to practice them. (*Emile*).

Furthermore, Rousseau gives some clues on feminine virtues when in the book five of *Emile*, he explains that the education of a men will be accomplished once he knows how to chose his future wife and mother of his children, a woman of modest beauty but shiny spirit. The prevalence of *l'être* over *le paraître* is evident, women's virtue is something that comes from within, and it has little to do with the appearance.

In *Julie*, Rousseau warns the reader that his book was not written to please the majority of people, in fact he was certain that it would displease those who did not believe in virtue. The treatment he gives to Julie's virtue is completely different from that of his male character, *Emile*.

In his epistolary novel Rousseau married terms that in this chronological survey, have been expounded as antagonist: virtue and passion. Julie, a married woman, finds a passionate love out of wedlock, nevertheless, this relationship is submerged in virtue which makes it morally acceptable. In other words, thanks to the virtuosity of Julie, the heroine of the history preaches her unconditional love to her lover yet this love is dispossessed of carnal desire. In fact, in her last letter to her lover, Julie admits to rather die over being tempted to be unfaithful to her husband: *“Non, je ne te quitte pas, je vais t'attendre. La vertu qui nous sépara sur la terre nous unira dans le séjour éternel. Je meurs dans cette douce attente: trop heureuse d'acheter au prix de ma vie le droit de t'aimer toujours sans crime, et de te le dire encore une fois!”*<sup>46</sup>

As discussed earlier, Rousseau held virtue as a quality of men and women. However, his two major works on virtue, show that his moral philosophy contained thoughts on gendered virtue, for it was seen as an aptitude of character required in boys' social development, while for girls it was considered as the capacity of not giving up to her sexual desires, hence remain faithful to their husband. Rousseau's gendered perception of virtue evidences a century of gender discrimination that will decline on a rejection and strong criticism of virtues, being considered as pure hypocrisy. The flourishing of more liberal philosophies, makes virtue lose its puritan aspect regarding women, leading the path to its contemporary definition, a general and genderless one as dreamed by Socrates.

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<sup>46</sup> “No, I don't leave you, I am going to wait for you. The virtue that separated us on earth will reunite us in the eternal journey. I die in this waiting: I am happy to give my life as the price of having the right of loving you with no crime, and being able to say it to once more!”

## Conclusion

The word virtue had experienced a bizarre evolution through history. From meaning the most virile qualities representing the ancient men's spirit of leadership, it got to be applied to women, referring to their courage and willingness to remain chaste, and was never a steady term. Furthermore, it is a hard to define term, because of its paradoxical nature. Virtue, a feminine word in gender, had been primarily recognized in men; while vice, a masculine word in gender, had been mainly attributed to women. Nonetheless, the coherence of this metamorphosis relies on the social, political and economic context of each period.

As the contemporary philosopher, MacIntyre said, history's works about virtue have always differed in their list of virtues and have had discordant theories of the virtues (even within the same period of history). Nonetheless, he concludes that the variances are caused by the different practices that generate different notions of virtue. In order to better understand the meaning of virtue on each period, it is necessary to take into account the moral and social situation of the time.

Regarding its gendered character, it is important to highlight that women were never denied virtuosity, it was just not the same for women as it was for men, there was no equality because there was an evident discrimination and prejudice towards women. Nonetheless, in several occasions women were proven to be the invisible hand that moved and pushed men and society forward and it was recognized by authors of both genders.

This survey of the evolution of virtue as a gendered term, from the ancient Greek civilization all the way to the eighteenth century, proved to be interesting as useful as it gave testimony of how rich it is in meanings and how it is unavoidably tied to three of the main

practices in the history of men: philosophy, politics and religion. Furthermore, the prevalence of the word during the five centuries here studied, as well as the fluctuation of its meaning is the most compelling evidence of its importance, and a relevant element on the study of gendered morality. The scope of this research is ample yet precise, and it is in this characteristic that relies its relevance. Most studies focus on listing virtues or analyzing its artistic representations, but this study maps its evolution paying special attention to its relation with social demeanor according to gender. When reading Early Modern France's literature, the main characteristic that will be found is that the word is extensively used. This research will allow scholars to better understand and contextualize the social, political and religious situation by identifying the undelaying meaning and implications of the term virtue, extensively used in Early Modern France's literature. Furthermore, it will serve other researchers as a map to better visualize the evolution of virtue and perform comparative studies, as well as an idea to deepen in the investigation of virtue from other different perspectives that could not be covered in here yet were announced.

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