

Plot Summary of The Book of the City of Ladies

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 discusses the achievements of women of the classical pagan past in the areas of governance and leadership of their people, which provides the foundation for the city. Christine is instructed in this effort by Lady Reason. Part 2 represents the present virtues of women as daughters, wives, and mothers, which supports the buildings of the city and its population. Lady Rectitude guides Christine in this work. Part 3 may be viewed as the future in which the highest palaces of the city are constructed to enthrone the Virgin Mary as its queen and provide housing for associated Christian saints. Lady Justice guides Christine in this phase, and Christine invites all women of virtue, past, present and future, to live in the city.

Part 1, Sections 1 – 11 Christine finds herself discouraged that so many works of literature vilify women as a group simply because they are women. Three ladies, Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice, appear to her and inform Christine that she shall build a city of ladies based upon an accounting of their virtues. Lady Reason guides Christine in digging the foundation.

Part 1, Sections 12–13

Through question and answer, Christine learns from Lady Reason about queens and princesses who took over the task of rule and leadership of their people upon the death of their husbands. In the areas of both governance and in battle, these women overcame general reluctance of all strata of the population to accept a woman as ruler. Christine and Lady Reason then discuss the issue of women entering legal professions.

Part 1, Sections 14–26

Lady Reason answers Christine's observations on how Nature has endowed men and women with different physical attributes. To add a new aspect to the conversation, Lady Reason offers examples of pagan women of the past who displayed extraordinary courage in battle by describing their physiques and battle styles. Some examples of such women who displayed courage and bravery conclude the preparations for the foundation of the city.

Part 1, Sections 27–48

Christine begins this work with questions to Lady Reason about women endowed with intelligence and knowledge. Lady Reason quickly supplies a series of examples from classical Greco-Roman history and mythology of women who benefitted civilization with important innovations. With these in mind, Christine completes the enclosure wall surrounding the city.

Part 2, Sections 1–6

With the guidance of Lady Rectitude, Christine takes on the task of the construction of buildings and the gathering of the ladies who will inhabit the city in Part 2. They begin with the divine revelations God bestowed on the ancient pagan sibyls of Greece and Rome. Their words predicting future events, including the coming of Christ, have proven true.

Part 2, Sections 7–12

Christine asks Lady Rectitude why daughters should not be as valued to their parents as sons. Lady Rectitude responds with numerous examples of daughters who remained faithful to or honored their parents. These daughters had the courage and resourcefulness to preserve the lives of their parents at great peril to themselves. Lady Rectitude declares the buildings now complete and ready to be filled with noble inhabitants.

Part 2, Sections 13–29

The issue of marriage constitutes the topic of conversation between Lady Rectitude and Christine as they go in search of inhabitants for the city. Several examples of how both men and women defile the institution of marriage are given. These are then countered by examples of loyal wives or instances in which wives have saved their husbands—or could have done so if their husbands had heeded their warnings—by ministering to them in illness or injury, or by giving good advice.

Part 2, Sections 30–36

The topic shifts here to the spiritual benefits women (both pagan and Christian) have brought into the world through inspiring behavior or notable bravery in the face of tyranny. The sections conclude with a discussion on the advisability of giving women an education.

Part 2, Sections 37–69

The criticism often raised against women is that as a sex women are more susceptible to corruption than men. Lady Rectitude and Christine draw from numerous examples in the Old Testament of women who, although attractive, were exemplary in defense of their chastity against men who tried to defile them. Having completed the task of populating the city with noble ladies, Christine turns to Lady Justice for help in completing the high towers of the city.

Part 3, Sections 1 – 19 The Virgin Mary, the first lady of the city and its queen, is brought in with her retinue and takes her place on the throne. Various saints attending her have their stories told by Lady Justice to Christine, who records them to complete the final touches to the city. In conclusion, Christine addresses the assembled female population to make their lives free from attack & devote themselves, regardless of rank, to the glory of God.