

## The Lamentations of Matheolus

“While married men necessarily know very little about women, Matheolus struggles through his bitterness to reveal more than enough of the truth about women, at the same time as serving as a warning to us all . . .”

[The following short extracts are from Le Fèvre's translation (c. 1371-2) of a subtle poem, the *Liber lamentationum Matheoluli*, written around 1295 by Mathieu of Boulogne (via a recent translation from Le Fèvre's by Karen Pratt, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, Oxford University Press, 1992)]<sup>1</sup>

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### [1] Dominating Clock

This female clock is really driving me mad, for her quarrelsome din doesn't stop for a moment. The tongue of a quarrelsome woman never tires of chiming in. She even drowns out the sound of the church bell. A nagging wife couldn't care less whether her words are wise or foolish, provided that the sound of her own voice can be heard. She simply pursues her own ends; there's not a grain of sense in what she says; in fact she finds it impossible to have a decent thought. She doesn't want her husband to be the boss and finds fault with everything he does. Rightly or wrongly, the husband has no choice: he has to put up with the situation and keep his mouth shut if he wants to remain in one piece. No man, however self disciplined or clear-sighted he may be, can protect himself adequately against this. A husband has to like what the wife likes, and disapprove of what she hates and criticize what she criticizes so that her opinions appear to be right. So anyone who wishes to immolate himself on the altar of marriage will have a lot to put up with. Fifteen times, both day and night, he will suffer without respite and he will be sorely tormented. Indeed, I believe that this torture is worse than the torments of hell, with its chains, fire, and iron.

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### [2] Living with a Basilisk

I, who once used to compose and polish off fine poems while my studies flourished and gave me great pleasure, have now fallen on hard times, not because of advancing age, but because of the constant nagging which upsets me. It's making me old before my time, allowing me no truce or respite. While asleep I dream of battles which end worse than they begin; I feel as if I am constantly at war whether awake or asleep. It's not surprising if I'm fed up with suffering such a cruel life, a life worse than death; for death stops once it has killed you, whereas this torture goes on and on and yet I must endure it. Since I am dying a terrible death, I should serve as a warning to all other men not to get married and to learn from my mistakes, thereby escaping woman and her wiles.

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<sup>1</sup> These extracts are taken from: <http://www.theabsolute.net/misogyny/matheol.html>.

If one's neighbour's house is on fire and one sees the flames leaping higher, one ought to fear for one's own house. If there is anyone who is so naive that he is untutored in woman's art, let him read this very work and select from it the most pleasing formulations himself. He will learn a lot from it provided that he uses it wisely. Dear reader, make sure that you rid yourself of women. Once you are acquainted with their opinions, behaviour and character (which I shall describe if I have the chance) then I believe that justice will prevail, that you will side with me and will rightly condemn them. Woman is always quarrelsome, a nag, cruel and shrewish. Peace and quiet are foreign to her...

Whether she is weeping or nagging, her husband hears everything, whether he wants to or not. Yet he dares not complain about it for in return for one word of complaint he would get a thousand. Instead he has to leave home and escape from his house. This treacherous cow treats him so badly that the man has to flee. It's true that smoke, rain, and a wife's unjustified nagging drive a man away from his home. When a woman argues and disputes she is often the one to start the quarrel. The water becomes undrinkable, the smoke from the hearth clouds his sight, making his eyes weep and he is unable to stay any longer in those conditions. In order to start a fight the wife pretends that she has caught her husband in the act of adultery. She attacks or turns on him, or strikes their child so that it screams and she couldn't be bothered to calm it down, she is such a cruel viper.

Just as it is impossible for a fish to live out of water, so a wife can't live without abusing her husband and fighting. So I tell you truly, take in carefully what you read, for she is like a basilisk and may God protect you from this snake that kills people with its gaze. Above all retain this piece of advice: the only antidote is to flee it. Man is much safer with a snake or a lion than with a woman in fighting mood. I can demonstrate this with indisputable proof. You can tame all wild beasts by using chains or cages, ingenuity and cunning, and break their proud spirits, but you can't do this with your wife, for you can't get rid of an old crease in a boot. Even if you could conquer a whole empire by feats of arms, you would not be able to subjugate a woman. You can see this illustrated in paintings and Holy Scripture bears witness to this too. No man exists who has nothing to fear from her. If you are willing to acknowledge the truth, there is no man, however powerful, who isn't ultimately defeated by woman and her shield.

### **[3] "Jangling" Woman**

Indeed, the birds will stop singing and the crickets in summer too before woman finds the strength to hold her tongue, whatever harm comes of her words. For Calphurnia, more gossipy than a magpie, this was indeed her undoing, since she did not plead her case wisely. Her verdict was to bare her bum. Her punishment for her crime, which she fully deserved, was to reduce all women to the status of second-class citizens. Each is deprived of and barred from practising advocacy. With her tongue and outrageous behaviour she banned all women. They have inherited her tongue and share in her guilt, according to the laws of heredity. Condemned in this way, rightly as far as I can tell, they are forbidden for all time to question witnesses and to defend cases...

Why is the raven black? Some writers lead us to believe that it was once white. She has changed her appearance as a sign of her fault, because she was a gossip, a slanderer, and a nag. If only our wives were now similarly metamorphosed by divine miracle and shed their nasty habits. If I had my way, no man would have to suffer this. Indeed, the devil was told

concerning woman that God, in whom all good abounds, would have made the world a peaceful place if he had removed the cursed tongues of women, so ill-pained in the art of speaking. In many a land and many a country, wars begin and are caused because of women. It seems therefore that whoever gave them the gift of speech was out of his mind. If one were to dare to accuse God, He would not be able to defend Himself against the charge of giving perverse women deadly weapons when He gave them many tongues. He saw the evil that would come of it, and yet did not wish to come to our aid. It's my belief that it would be a miracle to make a mute woman speak. But truly, it would be a much greater marvel if one were able to shut up a woman once she is in full flow. The two are barely comparable. Why are women more argumentative, so full of idle gossip and more talkative than men? Because they are made of bone, while our bodies are fashioned of clay: bone makes more noise than clay. Note therefore my conclusion, which does not offer us much solace: it is their nature which makes them all foolish and proud.

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#### **[4] The Free-wheeling Widow**

As soon as her husband is in his coffin, a wife's only thought day and night is to catch another husband. She observes convention by weeping, but after three days can't wait to be remarried. If her children wish to claim their share of the goods and money they have inherited from their father, there's not one of them who doesn't pay dearly for it. She disagrees with everything they say, argues, and is good at reproaching them, saying "I would already be married if it were not for your objections, for this has already happened to me three or four times. Now I'm having to dispute with you; what wretched progeny I have borne." Then she curses the fruits of her womb and tells them that despite their objections, without delay or further procrastination, she will marry one of her suitors, who will protect her rights for her.

And she is so eager to marry that she takes a husband who brings about her ruin: who spends and squanders her money, an unbridled spendthrift, who will not be restrained as long as she still has something in the loft. He leaves her with neither a penny nor halfpenny, neither land, vineyard, nor house which he hasn't sold; everything has been spent. Then, when she sees how she has been used, she complains to her children and weeps for her first husband. Such tears, may God help me, with which women reproach their most recent husbands are an indictment against the heat of their loins. Their frivolity does not excuse them.

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#### **[5] In Defence of Antifeminism**

Yet one might disagree with me, criticize my conclusion. and, putting forward the opposite point of view, suggest that my words are completely untrue. For, if some women are evil and perverse and abnormal, it does not necessarily follow that all of them are so cruel and wicked; nor should all of them be lumped together in this general reproach. A speech is badly composed if one's general conclusion is only partly valid. Logic hates this type of argumentation. Nevertheless, this present work, which expresses the pain in my heart, wishes me to exclude nothing, but commands me to push my argument to its logical, if extreme, conclusion, which is that no good woman exists. Solomon, in his works, makes an amazing comment, which supports my case, for he exclaims, "Who could find a virtuous woman?" The implication here is, of course, that this would be impossible. Since he says this, who am I to disagree? Why should I be shocked? What's more, he says that a base and broken man is

worth more than a woman when she's doing good. Thus there is no woman worth anything at all; I don't need to look for further proof. That's enough logical demonstration.

My exposition is clearly valid, for woman has - and there is ample evidence of this - deceived all the greatest men in the world; I shall be basing myself on rational argument. If the greatest are deceived, then the lesser naturally fall. In the street where I live they say that what applies to the greatest amongst us applies even more to lesser mortals. Who were the greatest lords? Who has ever heard of greater men than Solomon or Aristotle? Yet good sense, riches and reason were not worth a dung-beetle to them; all were made to look as if they had gone out of fashion; these men were both outmanoeuvred by women, deceived, vanquished, and tamed.

## **[6] Monstrous Woman**

Now you can see how foolhardy it is to take a wife. What will your response be? What is the point of your studying the matter? Don't get married, have mistresses. If you are weak by nature, it will be safer for you to have a hundred of them rather than devote yourself to one; treat them as if they were no more important than a straw. And if you are strong, take my advice, don't plunge yourself in the mire or frequent either one woman or many - I forbid you to have anything to do with them, for in the garden lurks a snake; and no one approaches it without regretting it afterwards.

Now I should like to rest for a while. for whoever sets out to expose the evils of the female sex, finds her poisonous acts too numerous to relate. Nature shows and teaches us that every woman is a real monster and that she is quite happy to put up with her own faults. There is no shortage of proof of this, or demonstration of how monstrous she is. It is said that woman was conceived without nature's consent. A philosopher testifies to this quite clearly in his works, saying that nature, having embarked on creation, was shocked when she contemplated her mistake and blushed as she became aware of it. Woman is a monstrous hermaphrodite, proving to be a chimaera with horns and a tail bigger than a peacock's or pheasant's. Thus she bears the marks of a monster, as this treatise informs you.

And if anyone were to say that women in general are slandered without taking account what each individual woman might do, and that some, who are specially favoured, deserve our respect and praise, I would venture to say that this would be an unnatural thing and that there has never been such a great miracle. For their sex in no way prepares them to be virtuous or to do good, indeed they are predisposed to do the very opposite.