

The Mansplained Tale: A Forum on the Plight and Status of Women Throughout History

by Thomas Reilly

Good evening, this is Anderson Cooper coming to you from Jerusalem. Tonight we are going to have a town hall discussion regarding the role, status, and treatment of women across the ages and determine if progress has been made from a 21st century viewpoint. With the help of modern holographic technology, we will be reaching out to various historical and fictional figures dating back to the very beginning of western civilization to gain their perspective on this important question.

Antigone: Excuse me please, I am Antigone of Thebes. Has Zeus perfected this grief, that we are going to discuss and try to answer these important questions, and the only moderator we have is a middle-aged white male? Why don't we add my Uncle Creon, Chuck Grassley and Orrin Hatch so we can reach a "fair and balanced" conclusion.

Ismene: Oh Antigone, has your past taught you nothing? You're in love with impossibility.

Antigone: Dear sister, I must stand up for right. Why not have one of the first female writers from the western world; the trenchant, erudite and very eloquent Christine de Pizan offer some balanced insight and much-needed diversity to this conversation. Surely the perquisites of power that men have enjoyed forever, can allow for one of the earliest feminists to help moderate a discussion about women? In the names of Jacosta and Gloria Vanderbilt, that can't be unreasonable can it?

Anderson: Very good Antigone. Ms de Pazan, please feel welcome to join us.

Christine: I accept your very generous offer, though Ovid, Cicero and Matheolus would lament my selection to help arbitrate this discussion. I must also humbly point out that it took the strident Antigone to recognize that God endowed women with the faculty of speech.¹ It seems that is a concept as mysterious in 2018 as it has been through the years.

Anderson: Our first guests come to us all the way from primeval history. Join me in welcoming Adam and Eve. We have read in Genesis a couple versions of the creation story of humanity. What is your firsthand account?

Adam: Well after the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, I was created. I planted the tree of life and created a river to irrigate the garden. I began tilling away while the animals and birds were formed.

Eve: Dear, I'm not sure you have that exactly right. I believe it is written that God created all living things, not you.

Adam: Don't confuse me with the facts Eve. Now, where was I? Things were going swimmingly, but the Lord said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.² I fell asleep and when I woke missing a rib, you were there forcing me to eat from the tree of life. For the first time, I noticed we were naked and it was all downhill from there.

Antigone: Trust me, you are not "Woke", though you need to be.

Christine: With all due respect Adam, God chose your rib to help form woman to signify that she should stand at your side as a companion and never at your feet like a slave and also that you should love her as your own flesh. If the Supreme Craftsman was not ashamed to create and form the feminine body, would Nature have been ashamed?³

Anderson: Good points Christine. Let's move ahead about 27 generations to another famous biblical couple from Genesis, Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham: As the father of the children of Israel who were the beneficiaries of my covenant with the Lord, what I am most proud of is being a good and faithful husband to Sarah. I put her priorities above my own throughout our long marriage, until I became a widower when she passed at one hundred twenty-

1 *The Book of the City of Ladies* published by Pan Books and translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards; p.28

2 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version*; Genesis 2:18

3 *The Book of the City of Ladies* published by Pan Books and translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards; p.23

seven years old.

Sarah: My sweet Abram, it is true that we had a long marriage, but I fear the years have caused you to become forgetful. Do you not recall when we travelled through Egypt, during a famine, and you became afraid of the Pharaoh? Your plan was to tell him I was your sister, relying on my beauty to attract the Pharaoh's attention and ensure your safety.

Hagar: Not exactly the model of chivalry master. And let me add to that the fact that when faced with the likelihood that you would be unable to yield offspring with your wife, I was chosen as a surrogate to produce a son for you. Being Sarah's handmaid, I was no more than a piece of property and my consent as a conjugal participant was never even a consideration. You may have promoted monotheism, but you were clearly not an advocate of monogamy. Ours was a covetous covenant, very different from your pact with God.

Antigone: OMZ! Are there any critical thinkers here? Seriously, does no one recognize male privilege when they see it? And can someone explain to me what this monotheism thing is?

Ismene: Oh Antigone, remember we are women, we're not born to contend with men. Then too, we're underlings, ruled by much stronger hands, so we must submit in this, and things still worse.

Christine: My dearest Antigone, instead of fixating on Abraham, let us focus on the goodness of Sarah. We might speak of her chastity, for in her great beauty she so surpassed all other women of her time that many princes lusted after her. She was so loyal that she would not lower herself to listen to any of them. Among others who lusted after her was the pharaoh, so much so that he took her away by force from her husband. Yet, her great goodness, which surpassed even her beauty obtained such grace for her that our Lord, in His tender love for her, protected her from every villainy by tormenting the pharaoh and his household with such terrible diseases of mind and body and with such horrible visions that he never touched her and was forced to give her back.⁴

Anderson: It is time that we move our examination forward from the Pentateuch to Ancient Greece.

Creon: It's about time I'm allowed to speak. I've had to listen to my overly emotional and irrational niece prattle on about how difficult things have been for women. In today's parlance, we'd call her and women like her snowflakes. Let's face it, women have it easy. Men fight the wars and rule the state and it has fallen to me to determine what is best for the Thebian citizenry. Make Thebes Great Again is my motto. All we need women for is take care of our families, tend to the sick, bury the dead, unless of course there is a decree forbidding their burial, and STAY OUT OF THE WAY. If I defer to Antigone's contemptuous attitude I am not the man, not now; she is the man if this victory goes to her.⁵

Antigone: I was born to join in love, not hate – that is my nature.⁶ But does everyone see what I've had to deal with? Talk about family problems.

Christine: With all due respect Creon, it seems to me that these are all women's works and that these same works are the supreme footprints which God commands us to follow.⁷

Anderson: Next we are going to talk to someone who lived about 570 miles south of here in Medina nearly a millennium and a half ago. Mohammed is present to offer what has often been a controversial subject; context on the place of women in Islam.

Mohammed: Anderson, it was good to hear from Abraham, the upright one, and Hagar, as their coupling resulted in Ishmael. That trio traveled to Mecca long before I was born, and Abraham and Ishmael made a return visit to build the House. Islam is frequently misunderstood, so I appreciate the chance to share the truth. The Qur'an is not to be doubted and offers a guide to the righteous man who believes in God and the Last Day. The religion of Allah holds women in the highest esteem, offering them the ability to divorce and return of their dowry under certain conditions, as well as inheritance rights for widows and orphans. These were each very forward thinking

4 *The Book of the City of Ladies* published by Pan Books and translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards; pp.156 - 157

5 *Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, Translated by Robert Fagles, 1982 (lines 541-542)

6 *Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, Translated by Robert Fagles, 1982 (lines 591-592)

7 *The Book of the City of Ladies* published by Pan Books and translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards; p.26

in the time the Qur'an was written in the 7th century.

Anderson: Yes, I recognize that. I think the concern for those who believe in female equality and more specifically to our discussion, whether progress is being made to that end, comes in teachings like these from *The Cow*. “Women are your fields; go then, into your fields whence you please”⁸ or “men have status above women”. Or from *Women*, “men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient.”¹⁰

Antigone: Did you say good women are obedient? In the name of Simone De Beauvoir, you've got to be kidding me!?!?!

Christine: Antigone, one thing that it took me a long time to realize was that all the words of the philosophers are articles of faith, that they could never be wrong. One can interpret them according to the grammatical figure of *antiphrasis*, which means, as you know, that if you call something bad, in fact, it is good.¹¹ It serves all women to bear that in mind.

Anderson: Why don't we bring this deliberation forward to the present-day United States, which was founded on the principles of personal freedom. We've been able to get the Sage of Monticello to speak to the progress and opportunities that our Republic offers women.

Thomas: Thank you. As one of the Founding Fathers, I take great pride that the unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness have been maintained and expanded throughout the history of our great country. Ms de Pizan will be pleased that our nation advocated for the education of girls dating back to the very beginning of our country, often providing public funding to that end. The 19th amendment granted women the right to vote in 1920. And very recently, we saw the most women elected to the US Congress that at any time in our history. All told, the little ladies ought to be pretty pleased with how things are going.

Antigone: To quote Lin Manuel Miranda, “Thomas that was a real nice declaration, welcome to the present, we're running a real nation”. You seem to be leaving out a few things. I note that you state “all MEN are created equal”, which speaks volumes for what has happened here over the last two plus centuries. And regarding your comment about the number of women elected, though it was a record, the 102 women elected to the House account for less than a quarter of the seats and the 14 female senators means there will be 24 women serving in the upper chamber. So out of the 535 members of the US Congress, 126 or less than 24 percent are held by women. In the name of Sally Hemings, is that what you call equal rights??? And I'm not done. Per the 2018 edition of the Fortune 500, there were 25 female CEO's. A quick check with Hypatia tells me that's FIVE PERCENT. The Institute for Women's Policy Research indicates that last year, full time women made 80.5 cents for every dollar earned by men. Thomas, if there's any declaration I'm interested in, it's De Gouges Declaration of the Rights of Woman¹² written only a few years after yours. Your “When in the course of human events” has gotten all the press, but I'll take “Men are you capable of being just?” as an opening line any day. Down with the patriarchy!!!!

Ismene: Antigone, you are so rash – I'm so afraid for you.

Christine: Sweet Antigone, I so admire the passion you show for the fair and equal treatment of our sisters. It is clear our battle will have to continue. I could tell of countless ladies of different social backgrounds, maidens, married women, and widows in whom God manifested His virtues with amazing force and constancy. All women – whether noble, bourgeois, or lower-class – be well informed in all things and cautious in defending your honor.¹³

8 *The Koran*, Penguin Classics Translated with notes by NJ Dawood, 1916 p.33

9 *The Koran*, Penguin Classics Translated with notes by NJ Dawood, 1916 p.33

10 *The Koran*, Penguin Classics Translated with notes by NJ Dawood, 1916 p.64

11 *The Book of the City of Ladies* published by Pan Books and translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards; p.6

12 <https://csivc.csi.cuny.edu/americanstudies/files/lavender/decwom2.html>

13 *The Book of the City of Ladies* published by Pan Books and translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards; pp 254 & 256