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Epistres Familieres et Invectives**



Jerry C. Nash

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*Renaissance Misogyny, Biblical Feminism,  
and Hélienne de Crenne's  
Epistres familiares et invectives*

by JERRY C. NASH

And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world,  
what *she* has done will be told in *memory of her*.

— Mark 14:9<sup>1</sup>

Je t'admoneste de . . . te repentir, d'avoir detracté de celles, pour lesquelles  
extoller tous vertueulx se travaillent (K ii).

— Crenne<sup>2</sup>

WE WILL BEGIN WHERE ALL EARLY MODERN feminists, from Christine de Pizan to Hélienne de Crenne and beyond, begin: in the beginning was the word, and the word was misogynist. This is the ideological, literary, and cultural context for reading and appreciating virtually every early modern feminist work. Stung and dismayed in particular by her reading of the tirade against women by the cleric and poet Matheolus in his *Lamenta* (1300), Pizan at the very beginning of her highly influential *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405) informs us that she is determined to come to terms with such a blatant and long-standing tradition of misogyny: "Je me demandais quelles pouvaient être les causes et les raisons qui poussaient tant d'hommes, clerics et autres, à médire des femmes et à vitupérer leur conduite soit en paroles, soit dans leurs traités et leurs écrits . . . Philosophes, poètes et moralistes — et la liste en serait bien longue —, tous semblent parler

<sup>1</sup> Biblical references are to *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, with the Apocrypha*.

<sup>2</sup> "I admonish you . . . to repent for having slandered those whom all good people work to praise." Quotations in French are from Crenne, 1996. Page numbers, given in Roman numerals, are to the 1539 first edition, which are always provided by Nash in the 1996 critical edition. Translations into English, with a fair degree of modification, are from Crenne, 1986. They will be given henceforth in parentheses in the text following the original citation.

d'une même voix pour conclure que la femme est *foncièrement mauvaise et portée au vice*."<sup>3</sup> Pizan's commitment to revising and rewriting classical and especially clerical history in favor of woman and her moral worth is the first feminist project to truly debunk male vituperation of *le sexe féminin*, and the view in particular that "woman is evil by nature and prone to vice."

Much closer to Crenne were the misogynist and extremely disparaging words of Gratiien du Pont, whose *Controverses des sexes masculin et féminin* are, I am now convinced, what occasioned Crenne's own literary activity in composing her *Epistres familières et invectives*, or at least large parts of the *Epistres*. As the Renaissance master misogynist, Du Pont belabors his vitriolic perspective and attack on woman in a work that is remarkable for its unabated nastiness and its sheer length — three books covering over four hundred large folio pages in the 1534 Toulouse first edition. Following in the footsteps of his medieval misogynist brother Matheolus and other Christian and classical writers, Du Pont launches into diatribes against the offensive sexual behavior and highly questionable moral capacity of women to show that they are indeed "*foncièrement mauvaise[s] et portée[s] au vice*." But as far as Du Pont is concerned, he is simply recalling and recording the "authoritative truth" on women which has been put forth and tested from the beginning of time. Du Pont is pleased and proud to turn to his sources for "confirmation" of his own views, to these "*auteurs tant Theologiens, Historiographes, Legistes, Canonistes . . . par lesquelz est confermé le dire de l'auteur*." His long, two-page, single-spaced list of sources and authorities whom he invokes includes Genesis, Job, Mark, John, Moses, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Paul, Augustine, Thomas, the *Biblia aurea*, and the familiar name of Matheolus — all of whom appear at the very beginning of his work and give, as he sees it, "authenticity" to his views.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The cleric Matheolus was also called Mathieu le Bigame because he married a widow in violation of canonical interdiction. This woman, as we learn from reading his work, he soon came to hate, along with marriage itself. His *Lamentia*, containing extremely caustic invectives on the subject of women and marriage, were translated into French by Jean Lefèvre in 1370. All italics and translations in this essay are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Du Pont, fol. iiiiff. Quotations are from the British Library copy, Shelfmark C7b1. Conventional editing of this Renaissance text has been done by me. The *Controverses* were published in 1534; Crenne's *Epistres* appeared five years later in 1539.

Du Pont's concern with female ontological inferiority — that is, with male superiority — is an obsession that he justifies and feeds by turning especially to Christian tradition and scriptural authority. A man, even the most "wicked," we are assured, is of higher value in the eyes of his Creator (and thus in Du Pont's), than the "holiest woman": "Le createur a plus estimé en somme / Le plus meschant, et le plus infaict homme / Le plus mauvais, et plus villain infame / Que la plus sainte, & plus devoute femme" (fol. 23v). Forever invoking and interpreting, *à sa façon*, the story of creation and the fall in Genesis 2 and 3, Du Pont depicts woman as morally depleted and sexually conniving, always in collusion with the devil: "Luxurieuse, sans fin pensant en mal / La ayde et secours du grand prince infernal." Adam of course found this out too late: "Tout mal provint de femme anciennement / Tesmoing Adam, deceu villainement" (fol. 52). All of book 3 is a cataloging, with extended commentary by Du Pont, of "lustful" women, or women as "Exemples sur le peché de luxure. Et premierement des histoires de la sainte escripture" (fol. 143v). Starting with Eve, of whom Du Pont never tires, all the biblical women evoked in the *Controverses* are portrayed as villains or worse. In a word, or rather in the form of a checkerboard,<sup>5</sup> woman, and woman viewed in particular through Christian misogynist eyes, is all of the following: "femme abuseresse," "de mauix affluante," "infaicte meschante," "au monde nuisante," "grande tromperesse," "en bien negligente," "en luxure ardente," "charogne puante," "de vices regente," "en scavoir asnesse," "de vertu impotente," "de mal instiguate," "des bons bayssante," "grande pecheresse," "oeuvre insuffisante," "à Dieu malplaisante," "d'orgueil la deesse," "de l'homme servante," and so forth. The reader is overwhelmed by these epithets and cannot mistake the biblical "proof," or what Du Pont believes to be proof, underlying his negative views of woman's sexuality and her moral, intellectual worth. More than any other French Renaissance writer and misogynist, Du Pont is thus responsible for promoting a religious basis for understanding female inferiority and subordination.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Eschequier en forme deue," fol. 54v. Du Pont also prided himself on being one of the century's leading Grands Rhétoriqueurs. The checkerboard poetic design is one of many examples of intricate, visual poetry in the *Controverses*.

<sup>6</sup> This kind of cleverly-crafted (as the misogynists saw it) verbal depiction of woman culminates in the late Renaissance and early seventeenth century with Jacques Olivier's *Alphabet de l'imperfection et malice des femmes* (1617). He dedicates his work

There is an especially harsh and classically misogynist character in Crenne's *Epistres*, however, who picks up where Matheolus and especially Gratien du Pont leave off. His discourse, teeming also with biblical wording and references and disparaging epithets on "what *she* has done" (to return to Mark 14:9) and "told in *memory of her*," was indeed written, just as Pizan had previously defined the discourse of misogyny, "d'une même voix pour conclure que la femme est foncièrement mauvaise et portée au vice" ("with the same voice proclaiming that woman is evil by nature and prone to vice"). The husband of Hélienne in these letters will voice verbatim the misogynist views and biblical bias of his predecessors. The "injures" or insults used by the husband to attack Hélienne in *Epistre invective 2* in particular (and whom Hélienne responds to in the next letter, in *Epistre invective 3*, both of which constitute a veritable *débat littéraire* on feminism and anti-feminism in the Renaissance) always portray woman "de lubricité attaincte," and women "de luxure fetides [esprises] & maculées"<sup>7</sup> (H vi: "consumed by carnal delights," "consumed and contaminated by lust"). Having learned to "deteste[r] tout le sexe féminin" (H iiiii: "to loathe the entire female sex"), this husband views his wife Hélienne, as well as woman in general, to be morally and sexually degenerate, and nothing more than modern-day Eves. Thus, his stated purpose in *Epistre invective 2* is to "[lui] inferer [donner] punition, telle que [son] inique scelerité [meschanceté] l'a deservye" (H iiiii: "to inflict upon her the punishment her iniquitous behavior deserves").<sup>8</sup>

to "la plus imparfaicte créature de l'univers, l'écume de la nature, le séminaire de malheurs, la source de querelles, le jouet des insensés, . . . l'allumette du vice, la sentine d'ordure, un monstre de nature, un mal nécessaire." His twenty-five portraits or views of woman each correspond to a letter of the alphabet. For example, "*Advisissimum animal*, animal très avide; *Bestiale baratrum*, abîme de bêtise; *Concupiscentia carnis*, concupiscence de la chair; *Duellum damnosum*, duel dommageable; *Estuans aestans*, été brûlant"; and so forth. See Albistur and Armogathe, 124 for the first quotation; and Darmon, 7 for the second one.

<sup>7</sup> The variants proposed by Claude Colet in the 1560 edition of the *Epistres*, which make Crenne's 1539 text less Latinate and thus more easily read, are given in brackets within the original French quotations.

<sup>8</sup> Hélienne's husband is even put in the position of actually writing *Epistre invective 2*, as we read in the letter's *salutatio* where its authorship is ascribed to him. This strategy puts Crenne (the real author) in the even better position of having the last word on misogyny in this Renaissance *débat*, as we shall see in *Epistre invective 3*. I shall always refer to Crenne as the author and to Hélienne as the fictional character

The "odieuse *macule*" ("hateful stain") of Hélienne's "enormes pechez" ("monstrous sins") — clearly a reference to the biblical "stain of sin" or curse brought upon Eve in Genesis 3 — her "effrénée lascivité" ("unbridled lust"), "luxure abominable" ("abominable lust"), and "beaultez, fardz & aornemens, dont tant de malheurs s'ensuyvent" (I iii: "physical allurements, the source of so much grief"), are what turn Hélienne into the sexually degenerate and conniving "maledicte [maudite] creature" ("wretched woman") that she and all women are. The misogynist husband is of course convinced of this, "car il est notoire qu'estant la femenine condition de *luxure prevenue*, une merveilleuse audace l'associe" (I: "for everybody knows that the female condition exists to satisfy its lascivious desires, to which end women become remarkably daring"). Woman's nature is thus defined by him, based on his way of interpreting Genesis 3, as the combination of fundamental "lustfulness" and scheming "audacity." As Proverbs and other sources put it, women are truly temptresses, betrayers, and the source and cause of evil doings; such biblical "authority" is subscribed to by this husband without hesitation: "For the lips of a strange woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil" (5:3-4); "Let not your heart turn aside to her ways, do not stray into her paths; for many a victim has she laid low; yea, many strong men have been slain by her" (7:25-26). In deprecating woman, Hélienne's husband is clearly attempting to absolve himself, and men in general, from all moral responsibility in the realm of sexual activity. As he sees it, they are simply victims caught up in a situation over which they have no control, ensnared like Adam by Eve:

Pour certain il n'y a plus superbe ne perilleux ennemy de l'homme que la femme . . . O que infelices [malheureuses] sont voz beaultez, fardz & aornemens, dont tant de malheurs s'ensuyvent . . . la guerre [waged by sexual woman against rational man] aulcunesfois est *cause de nous faire en leurs laqs deceptifz succumber* (I iii-I iii: "Surely there is no more proud or perilous enemy of man than woman . . . How dangerous are your physical allurements, the source of so much grief . . . in the struggle against women we often fall right into their traps").<sup>9</sup>

or letter writer and first-person narrator of these letters. The real name of our letter writer is of course Marguerite Briet, whose literary pseudonym is "Hélienne de Crenne."

<sup>9</sup> There is another major misogynist (there are also minor ones throughout this epistolary work) whom the reader will encounter in *Epistre invective* 4. Whereas the husband in *Epistre invective* 2 whom we have been quoting denigrates woman as

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that the necessary groundwork has been laid, we can turn specifically to a true understanding and appreciation of Crenne's biblical feminism, which constitutes "her-story," that is, by necessity, a reaction to the "hi(s)-story" of misogyny. Like patriarchy, misogyny is the source of woman's oppression as well as woman's power.<sup>10</sup> On such a fundamental issue like the nature of woman, and especially in being confronted with such an overwhelmingly negative picture of woman and female sexuality and morality, it is not surprising that Crenne, following the lead of Pizan, will go to the source, and turn to the Bible itself and to Christian tradition and ideology in order to find, as Hélienne puts it in the *salutatio* of *Epistre invective* 3, "plusieurs raisons aptes à confondre le dire de son mary" (I iv: "several arguments in refutation of her husband's opinion").

The Bible was considered a valuable and reliable source in the Renaissance by many defenders as well as attackers of women. Misogynists and profeminists alike looked to theology and the Bible to supply them with arguments and anecdotes and examples of both bad and good women. In her own rhetorical, polemical strategy and discourse of reversal and disclosure — used by virtually all early modern feminists as well as by more modern ones — Crenne accomplishes three things. She totally debunks the misogynist views presented above by showing them to be purely personal and prescriptive rather than descriptive of woman's "nature." Secondly she levels the ethical and biblical playing field, so to speak, on questions of morality by rejecting the male argument of woman's sexual inferiority and depravity based on generalizations and especially the use by misogynists of a double standard to assess morality. Finally, Crenne not only defends but praises woman through her discussion and portrayal of female exemplarity in the realm of ethics and morals. The purpose and method of Crenne's feminist project are thus identical to

morally and sexually degenerate, this other one denigrates woman's intellectual and cultural merit and public accomplishments. This other side of misogyny and Crenne's response to it are discussed in Nash, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> "Feminist theorizing arose in the fifteenth century in intimate association with, and in reaction to, the new secular culture of the modern European state. It was the voice of literate women who felt themselves and all women maligned and newly oppressed by that [misogynist and patriarchal] culture, but who were, at the same time, empowered by it to speak out in women's defense" (Kelly, 1984, 66).

Pizan's in the *Cité des Dames* and also a fulfillment of the prediction found in Mark 14:9. As a dedicated feminist encomiast, she, too, relies on a resounding memorial art for "telling" the "memory of her" and "what she has done." And like Pizan's, Crenne's project is a very *different* memory and telling from the misogynist pronouncements of Du Pont and company. As Crenne understands the biblical principle, her writing will be fervently focused on "*celles, pour lesquelles extoller tous vertueux se travaillent*" (K ii: "those whom all good people work to praise"). Praise them and commemorate them in her letters she does, with narrative emphasis placed on the ethical "*doing*" of women as an integral part of the early feminist discourse of cultural reversal and disclosure. In a word, Crenne will use the gospel, as called for in Mark 14:9, to spread the feminist gospel on woman. As we shall also see, she does not hesitate to use "*la fureur de [la] plume*" (L iii: "the fury of the pen") in her epistolary writings to accomplish her ends.

\* \* \* \* \*

The feminist principle of reversal begins perforce with refuting and rejecting the dominant misogynist view of women's identity and female conduct, as Hélienne indicated above in her desire to "*confondre le dire de son mary*" ("to refute her husband's opinion"). She further explains in *Epistre invective* 3 the urgent need of such reversal:

Mais voyant que *generalement* tu deteste la femenine condition, m[']a semblé que trop est grande l'injure, puis qu'elle est *universelle*. Et pource passant soubz silence, ce que je pourois *respondre*, à ce que particulierement tu me dis, Je donneray principe [je commenceray] à *approuver* [prouver] *faulse l'accusation*, que tu fais de noz *malicieuses oeuvres*. (I v-I v': Seeing as how you loathe the whole feminine condition, however, it has seemed to me that your insult is particularly great because it is universal. I shall therefore be silent as to your accusations against me in particular and concentrate on refuting your incrimination of what you call our malevolent deeds.)

Reacting to, and therefore reversing, the misogynist "injure" and "accusation" was the necessary condition early modern women writers like Crenne found themselves in. As Joan Kelly so aptly describes the feminist response to Renaissance misogyny: "Caught up in opposition to misogyny, the feminists of the *querelle* remained bound by the terms of that dialectic. What they had to say to women and society was largely *reactive* to what misogynists said about women. Yet the way beyond that resistance had to lie through it . . . . To oppose misogyny was to initiate the long feminist struggle for women's *full* humanity



and for the humanity of society as well."<sup>11</sup> This "struggle" was precisely Crenne's in the *Epistres*, which retell in a different literary form and depict even more passionately and polemically the same drama between husband and wife found in Crenne's widely read *Les Angoysses douloureuses qui procedent d'amours*, her first work published in 1538, one year before the *Epistres*.

To prove the misogynist assessment of woman's evil nature false, Crenne turns to the other side of the Bible, to its profeminist side, and to a different perspective that the Bible itself makes possible.<sup>12</sup> Hélienne's husband had avowed how "[les] femmes sont infideles, inconstantes, frauduleuses & deceptives" ("women are unfaithful, inconsistent, fraudulent and deceptive") and, therefore, "qui presteroit foy à [son] dire, nul en mariaige ne se lyeroit" (I v<sup>v</sup>: "if anyone were to believe what he says, no one would ever get married").<sup>13</sup> Man is therefore better off, it would seem, avoiding woman and marriage in particular. Hélienne strongly disagrees with this and will try to remonstrate with her husband. Turning to Paul, who is also used by other Renaissance evangelicals like Erasmus to praise woman and her place in marriage (*Insitutio matrimonii christiani*), Hélienne reminds her husband that the institution of marriage was divinely ordained as a very special relationship between man (husband) and woman (wife),

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1982, 14-15. This essay was later revised, but not altered substantively, and published in book form (cf. preceding note). On the *querelle des femmes* and Renaissance debates about women that Crenne and other early modern writers were so actively involved in, see also the Introduction of Mustacchi and Archambault in their translation of Crenne's *Letters*, especially 17-25.

<sup>12</sup> For critical reading on the opposing views of woman in the Bible and in Christian culture, see, on biblical misogyny, the studies by Harris and Aubert; on biblical feminism, see those by Fiorenza and Guinsburg.

<sup>13</sup> The husband is repeating here what had previously been prescribed by Du Pont on the subject of woman and marriage. Marrying a woman is just as risky a venture, as Du Pont had put it, as riding a horse: "Sy tu veulx femme, prendz la de ton voysin/Car mainctes foyz, tant par montz que par vaulx/Lon est trompé, en femmes et chevaulx" (*Controverses*, fol. 48). The husband is also siding with the man who is contemplating the prospects of marriage in the *Débat de l'homme et de la femme* of Guillaume Alexis, an extremely popular *débat* published in Paris in 1493, 1500, 1520, 1525, 1530, etc. The refrain which closes each stanza where "l'homme" expresses his views is identical to the misogynist and misogynist view of Hélienne's husband: "Bien eureux est qui rien n'y a" ("Bien heureux celui qui s'absente de la femme" [Alexis, 1:121-44]; cf. Hélienne's husband: "Parquoy extreme beatitude succede, à ceulx qui de leurs deceptives personnes s'alienent" [I ii: "That is why we must count happy those who shun you deceiving creatures"]).

like the one between Christ and the church: "l'escripture sainte a exprimé l'estat de l'eglise [l'Eglise]: & choses ardues par cest estat de mariaige, appellant le redempteur l'espoux & l'eglise [l'Eglise] son espouse" (I v<sup>r</sup>: "Scripture has compared the state of the Church to the state of marriage, calling the Redeemer a bridegroom and the Church his bride"). Crenne is referring here to Ephesians 5:25-32, where the husband is urged to imitate Christ in conjugal love and respect: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . This mystery [the union of man and woman in marriage] is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

Hélisenne then proceeds, ironically, to instruct her husband in misogyny, which is obviously part of her strategy to preempt the misogynist argument. Whereas the husband might have used the examples of Solomon and the Book of Wisdom to further denigrate women and to warn his male colleagues "que l'on ne doit entendre la tromperie d'une femme, c'est qu'on se doit preserver de l'iniquité feminine: & de la melliflue prononciation d'une femme estrange" ("against Woman's deception, Woman's iniquity, and the mellifluous accent of a foreign woman"), she reminds him that such negative views also serve the opposite purpose of reinforcing and promoting a positive judgement of "good women": "Plusieurs aultres choses des mauuaises ont escript, Mais tu dois entendre, que *merveilleusement sert à la decoration des bonnes*" (I vi-I vi<sup>r</sup>: "They have written many other things about bad women, but you must understand that this is a marvelous way of promoting good women"). As Hélisenne is quick to point out, Solomon and others also wrote, in praise of woman and marriage, "qu'en la femme forte & bonne le cuer de son mary repose: & si est dit aussi que la femme est la couronne de l'homme, edifie sa maison, & que c'est sa consolation & hilarité [joye]" (I vi<sup>r</sup>: "that in a woman of valor and strength the heart of a husband can find peace. They also state that Woman is Man's crown, the adornment of his home, his consolation and his joy"; cf. Proverbs 5, 6, 7, 12, 31). For Hélisenne, such biblical views and testimony on women and on their positive contribution to marriage are absolutely beyond refuting. She thus ends her plea to her husband on this subject: "Que pourrois tu donc respondre à ces *veritables parolles*" (I vi<sup>r</sup>: "These are words of truth. What rejoinder could you possibly give")?

Hélisenne takes up next in this third invective letter another point of argument used by her husband, a favorite biblical "proof" used by misogynists to further soil the reputation of women: their beauty and vain use of cosmetics and dress with the sole purpose of alluring males. Hélisenne cautions her husband: "Pour certain utile ne te sera de dire que formosité femenine, avec force & somptuosité d'accoustremens, ne sont seulement choses vaines, mais *tres dommageables*" ("Surely it is pointless for you to say that feminine beauty with its sumptuous dress is both vain and very dangerous"). "Very dangerous," that is, as the husband had argued in the preceding letter (I iii<sup>v</sup>: "pour certain il n'y a plus superbe ne perilleux ennemy de l'homme que la femme . . . O que infelices [malheureuses] sont vos *beaultez, fardz & aornemens*, dont tant de malheurs s'ensuyvent" ["Surely there is no more proud or perilous enemy of man than woman . . . How dangerous are your physical allurements, the source of so much grief"]), because of "les perilz preteritement [par le passé] aux hommes intervenus, pour avoir esté imitateurs de ses [ces] *beaultez excellentes*" (I vi<sup>v</sup>-I vii: "the perils into which men have fallen in the past for having been fascinated by woman's beauty"). Hélisenne's response to this view is incisively simple as she characteristically turns the table against the accuser: "Car je t'asseure qu'elle [female beauty] n'est perilleuse pour les hommes, ausquelz consiste vertu" (I vii<sup>v</sup>-I viii: "I can assure you it holds no danger for any man of integrity").

To support her statement and to show that men should not condemn or be fearful of female beauty, Hélisenne invokes again the Bible, Deuteronomy 21:10-14 this time, where the "enfants d'Israel" are permitted to select their wives from the most "beautiful" women prisoners: "Et si elle causoit si mauvais effectz comme tu dis, en Deuteronomie, ne seroit permis aux enfans d'Israel, d'eslire entre les captives & prisonnieres les belles femmes" (I viii: "If womanly beauty were as destructive as you say it is, the children of Israel would not have been allowed to select beautiful wives from among their prisoners and captives, as found in Deuteronomy"). She also turns to Genesis 24:15-61, where Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac: "Nous lisons du serviteur d'Abraham, que quand il eust dressé sa veue sur Rebeca fille de *admirable beaulté*, Il dist secrettement en soy mesme, icelle [celle] est la femme que Dieu a appareillée pour Isaac" (I viii: "We read of Abraham's servant that when he laid eyes on the very beautiful Rebecca he wondered whether this was the woman whom God had

meant for Isaac"). From 1 Samuel 25:32-35, Hélienne recalls this feat by Abigail, described there as a woman "of good understanding, and of a beautiful countenance": "Je me recorde aussi d'Abigail femme de Nabal, tresmalicieux homme : laquelle n'estoit moins prudente que belle, qui fut occasion de conserver la vie & les biens de son mary: nonobstant la ferocité de David, & ainsi fut l'homme inique preservé par la beaulté de sa femme" ("I also remember the example of Abigail, the wife of Nabal, a most evil man. She was no less wise than beautiful, which allowed her to preserve her husband's life and possessions in spite of David's ferocity; and thus was that iniquitous husband saved by his wife's beauty"). Female beauty is even depicted here as rescuing male iniquity: "Car David luy respondit les parolles qui s'ensuyvent. Vas en paix en ta maison: car j'ay ouy ta voix & ay honoré ta face" (I viii: "For David said to her: 'Go up in peace to thine house; see, I have hearkened to thy voice and have accepted thy person'").

Other biblical sources, episodes, and commentary are similarly retrieved and become an integral part of Hélienne's feminist argument. Their purpose is to counter her husband's misogynist perspective on female beauty and woman's reliance on that beauty for sexually evil and conniving gains (woman again as "foncièrement mauvasse et portée au vice" ["evil by nature and prone to vice"], as Pizan had defined the misogynist view). To further reject his opinion "que l'ornement des femmes, de soy provoque et attire les hommes à lascivité & luxure" ("that men are drawn into lasciviousness and lust by the way women dress"), Hélienne will summarize Jerome (in his *Letter XXII* to Eustochium) on the positive role of female dress and accoutrements:

& quand ad [à] ce que tu dis de la curiosité femenine, en sumptueux & riches accoustrements, Sainct Hierosme a redigé par escript, que les femmes & filles sont desiruses de precieulx vestemens, & scavoit plusieurs dames pudiques le faire, non pour complaire aux folz, ne par orgueil: mais par honnesteté ayant regard à l'estat & noblesse de leurs mariz, ou de leur pere. (I viii<sup>v</sup>: As to what you have said about women's willingness to experiment in rich and sumptuous clothes, Jerome has written that women and girls desire expensive clothes; and he knew several chaste women who did so, not in order to satisfy foolish men nor out of pride, but out of honest regard for the social state of their husbands or fathers.)

Suzanna (Daniel 13) is precisely one of these women invoked by Crenne as an example of she who attends to her beauty out of respect for her husband:

lors qu'elle fut molestée de la perversité des deux vieillars se mundifioit [se lavoit] à la fontaine, & avoit envoyé investiguer [querir] par ses pedissecques [servantes] unguens odoriferens, pour la conservation de sa naturelle beaulté, & pour complaire à son mary. (K-K<sup>v</sup>: Suzanna, in the Old Testament, was molested by two perverse old men while she was washing at a fountain and awaiting the return of her servants whom she had sent to fetch her best and most perfumed lotions; she wished both to preserve her natural beauty and to please her husband.)<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the example of Suzanna, Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, II, ii, question 169, article 2: "Non semper tamen talis fucatio est cum peccato mortali, sed solum quando fit propter lasciviam vel in Dei contemptum") becomes for Hélienne a most reliable and valuable reference on woman and the wearing of makeup. She quotes him to show that this custom does not constitute a mortal sin unless it is done out of "oultrecuydance, lascivité, ou contemnement de Dieu" (K<sup>v</sup>: "arrogance, lasciviousness, or contempt of God"). At the very least, as far as Hélienne is concerned in concluding her argument on female beauty and its enhancements, woman should be given the benefit of the doubt. Man should not be so quick in rushing to pass

<sup>14</sup> In *Epistre familiere* 3, Suzanna is again referred to as an example of female beauty and chastity, and cited to show the slander and persecution that women possessing these qualities can encounter. Hélienne writes to a cousin, who was also suffering from this kind of misogynist treatment: "pour certain tu n'es seulle, ayant esté persecutée, de cette pululante detraction. Ne sces tu que la chaste Suzanne de faulx delateurs fut accusée? Mais estant la splendeur de sa sincerité bien grande, par faulx rapport, ne se peult long temps occulter. Parquoy son innocence fut purgée & démontrée. Si cela en ta *memoire* assiste, facilement ta douleur mitigueras" (B ii: "Surely you are not the only one to have been persecuted by the spread of slander. Don't you know that the chaste Suzanna also had her false detractors? But since the splendor of her sincerity was so bright it could not long be concealed by a false report. Her innocence was therefore cleansed and brought to light. Remember this, and it will ease your sorrow"). Having been accused of licentiousness and adultery by two old judges who were not able to compromise her virtue, Suzanna was condemned to death but saved, *in extremis*, by young Daniel (Daniel 13). Clearly, a major motive behind Crenne's writing is therapeutic. Her use of examples, as in the case of Suzanna, is to console and to encourage her readers, to help them overcome their pain and sorrow ("ta douleur mitigueras"). For a discussion of Crenne's *epistulae consolatoriae*, see Nash, 1993.

judgment on her: "& pource que les choses mentales nous sont occultes, nous ne devons estre prompts à faire jugemens des intentions d'aultruy" (K: "since the things of the mind are concealed from us, we should not be too quick to judge the intentions of others"); "& pource que les occasions nous sont ignorées, nous devons toujours prendre les choses de la meilleure part" ("because the real reasons are hidden from us, we must always accept these things in their best light"); and, above all else, "ne plus determiner si promptement" (K ii: "not be such a rash judge"). Hélienne's misogynist husband is however incapable, as we have seen, of such restraint or of viewing woman and her activities "in their *best light*" ("de la *meilleure part*").

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And then there is the remarkable example of Judith, who is a very special biblical heroine for Crenne and the central memorial figure, indeed the mnemonic *locus*, of *Epistre invective* 3. Judith is a woman, as Hélienne remembers her, of exceptional beauty and virtue at the fore of "celles, pour lesquelles extoller tous vertueulx se travaillent" ("those whom all good people work to praise") and of those who "de sempiternelle louenge sont dignes" (K ii: "are worthy of eternal praise"). Hélienne additionally discusses the ethical exemplarity of Judith by relying again on Jerome's commentary of the Latin Vulgate text of Judith translated from the Old Testament Apocrypha, in which he offers passionate praise of this biblical character, praise which Hélienne shares and repeats:

Prenez la veufve Judich [Judith] pour exemple de chasteté: & la magnifiez par louenge triumphale, & par canticques perpetuelz: car celluy qui est remunerateur de sa chasteté l'ya faicte, non seulement digne d'estre imitée des femmes: mais aussi des hommes, & l'ya tant favorisée qu'il luy a concedé telle vertu, qu'elle a obtenu victoire de celluy qui demouroit invincible de tous: & a supedité celluy qui estoit insuperable. (K ii-K ii': Take the woman Judith as an example of chastity and praise her with triumphal song and perpetual hymns and canticles. For He who rewarded her chastity made her worthy to be imitated not only by women but by men: and He so favored her that He gave her the strength to gain victory over an enemy who had until that time been invincible.)

For Crenne, female beauty and chastity can lead to much more than just ethical behavior. They can be the instruments of political assassination, of biblical good triumphing over evil, of the biblical tradition of God manifesting his power by choosing to work through

the "weaker sex," through a woman, in this case a piously retired widow who outwits the overwhelming enemy force that threatens to destroy her people. Through Judith, Crenne shows us how activity in the moral-sexual and political domains can ultimately be seen as functionally and heroically equivalent. For not only does Judith, through her beauty, preserve her chastity, she saves the Jewish people. The biblical scene and text on this subject posit nothing less than the triumph of feminine virtue over brute force, with emphasis on the heroic acts of *doing* by Judith. Her highly renowned beauty and the "subterfuge" that ensues from it totally captivate the Assyrian enemy soldiers and especially Holofernes, their powerful and ruthless general (Judith 10:1-20). Judith's beauty and apparent sexual conniving are in fact a coverup for her wit and become her very means of serving God. Her hand as the hand of the Lord will exterminate the enemies of Jerusalem. As she ironically tells Holofernes's eunuch when he comes to invite her to Holofernes's tent as part of the *latter's* seduction plan: "Who am I, to refuse my lord? Surely whatever pleases him I will do at once, and it will be a joy to me until the day of my death" (12:14). What she *does* with her hand is cut off the head of Holofernes. The "virtue" or "strength" given to her by the Lord ("car celluy qui est remunerateur de sa chasteté l[']a faicte"), and for which she is worthy of praise and of emulation not only by women but also by men ("non seulement digne d'estre imitée des femmes: mais aussi des hommes"), enables her to keep her chastity and to defeat "celluy qui demouroit invincible de tous." Chastity and beauty as wit and Justice are what she uses to "supedit[er] celluy qui estoit insuperable." And what she "procures" ("supediter") through her beauty and chastity is the severed head of Holofernes and thus the salvation of the Israelite people. Judith also procures Crenne's highest "louenge triumphale" in *Epistre invective* 3.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Crenne's "triumphal praise" of the exemplary "chastity" of this biblical heroine is also a continuation of the praise paid to Judith by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa in his *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (Antwerp, 1529). The liminary poem of this highly profeminist work announces perfectly the feminist project of Crenne in her *Epistres*: a project dedicated first to "cesse[r] d'appliquer au sexe féminin / Des blâmes perfides" (the refutation of misogynist slander and abuse) and then to "lou[er], de préférence aux hommes, le sexe féminin" (the subsequent principle of praise of woman). Among other "good" women, Judith occupies a very important position in

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There can be no doubt that Judith is, for Crenne, the biblical equivalent of the classical Dido, whose character and accomplishments are the focus of Crenne's writing in *Epistre familiere* 8. Both of these women are viragoes or heroines (good "virile" women of great stature, strength, and courage, and of great public accomplishments), with narrative emphasis placed on their acts or their *doing*, that is, as Crenne portrays it, on their "exerceant oeuvres viriles" ("exercising manly tasks"). (Indeed, what Crenne really chooses to highlight in her narrative on Dido, as in Judith, is her "virility," not her succumbing to passion and becoming the myth of the tragic heroine. Other Renaissance writers of course stress the latter.) Dido, like Judith, is a woman strong in courage and capable of performing even the most daring of actions. Just as we saw in the passage on Judith, she is a woman whom "l'adverse fortune ne pouoit aulcunement superer [surmonter]" (*Epistre familiere* 8, D v: "adverse fortune could not at all defeat"). Crenne admires Dido the classical virago as a female hero, a virtuous widow, and an effective ruler and especially an achiever. She encourages her female readers to identify with this exemplary role model, just as she had done with the example of Judith. Hélisienne writes to one of her friends, emphasizing and explaining Dido's "virile" nature:

Car je suis certaine que tu ne voudroys estre du nombre d'aulcunes pusillanimes femmes: Mais au contraire, t'esforceras d'estre semblable à celle à qui la magnanime constance, fut occasion de changer son nom primitif, qui estoit Helisa: Mais subsequencement appellée fut Dido, qui en langage Phenicien est interpreté, & vault autant à dire comme *Virago*, *exerceant oeuvres viriles*: Certainement c'estoit celle que l'adverse fortune ne pouoit aulcunement superer [surmonter]: Car à l'heure que icelle instable la vouloit totalement prosterner en permettant la mort immature de son fidele mary, Ceste Dido fist grande demonstrance de sa *vertu* . . . par elle fut construite & edifiée la noble cité de Carthage: laquelle depuis fut trefameuse & renommée. (D iiiii<sup>v</sup>-D v: I am sure you will not wish to be counted in the number of faint-hearted women but rather will endeavor to imitate one whose steadfast endurance was her reason for changing her former name. I mean Helisa, subsequently called Dido, which in the Phoenician language means 'Virago,' one who

Agrippa's profeminist treatise and encomium. For a good discussion of Agrippa's view of women and of Renaissance feminism, see Antonioli's "Préface" in his critical edition of *De nobilitate*, 29-38; 91 for the above quotation.



exercises manly tasks. She was a woman whom adverse fortune was not at all able to defeat; just when fortune was attempting to crush her completely by sending her faithful husband to a premature death, Dido gave ample proof of her courage . . . by building the great city of Carthage, which since then has become so very famous.)

Crenne's classical and medieval sources for the virile Dido include Virgil (*The Aeneid*, I, IV), Ovid (*Heroides*, VII), Boccaccio (*De claris mulieribus*, XL), and Pizan (*Cité des Dames*, I, 46; II, 54; II, 55). The "manly" virtue of such heroines as Dido and Judith is a biblical as well as a classical concept, and one that denotes a type of person, male or female. Crenne develops for the early Renaissance the truly revolutionary feminist implications of the biblical admonition, "there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). For Crenne, the accomplishment of "manly" or heroic works is not in relationship to gender but to individual ability and performance, in the sense of a single human nature and a single human activity. This virile nature, as some readers of the Bible such as Crenne knew, is thus one, both male and female, because it is of one and the same genesis or origin. Since man *and* woman were created from the same source, they may, equally, pursue the benefits of their creation. Of great importance to Crenne, I believe, and to our understanding of her portrayal of women as viragoes "exerceant oeuvres viriles" ("exercising manly tasks"), is precisely this story of creation, but not the one found in Genesis 2:21-22, whose misogynist interpretation Hélienne's husband, following the thinking of Du Pont and Matheolus, is so indebted to and obsessed with. Rather, it is the one found in Genesis 1:27, which I quote from the Vulgate version of the Bible: "Et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam: ad imaginem Dei creavit illum, *masculum et feminam* creavit eos" ("So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created them").<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The annotation of this line by May and Metzger reads: "*Him, them*: man was not created to be alone but is *male and female*. *Man*, the Hebrew word is 'adam,' a collective, referring to mankind" (2, their italics). The account of creation in chapter 1 of Genesis belongs to the Priestly tradition, whereas that in chapter 2 belongs to the Yahwist tradition. The dialectic in Genesis 1 is that Man-Adam-Mankind is made one and many, singular and plural, male and female. Thus, "neither male nor female *alone* is in the likeness of God, but both *together* . . . There are no two origins of mankind; the creation of woman is not delayed, as in the Yahwist account." On this subject of creation in Genesis 1 which endows early Christianity with "authentic feminism," see Tavard, especially chapter 1: "The Two Traditions," 3-26, and 10 for the above

Since woman, like man, was derived from and created by God, without the privileging of one sex over the other or any hierarchy established between the two sexes (Genesis 1), there can be no difference between the power allotted to man and that allotted to woman, nor any disparity between the accomplishments which *both* are capable of achieving. With this understanding and view of creation surely in mind — which amounts to a denial of any male sovereignty or superiority over women — Crenne rejects outright any ontologically fixed relationships between the sexes, and especially dispels the concept of woman as a purely sexual and thus inferior being. Biblically oriented and indebted as she is, there can be little doubt that Crenne knew the passage in Genesis 2. Like all other early modern feminist writers, however, she does not challenge it directly, for that would have been tantamount to attacking God's word. Crenne simply responds to the passage by ignoring it, which is a feminist statement in itself. Besides, her problem was with a certain class of men, not with God. For Crenne, the sexual dimorphism promoted by misogynists and used to denigrate women by stressing their different (i.e., inferior) nature has no real foundation, biblical or other. For her, it is not

quotation. Genesis 1 is crucial for an understanding of biblical feminism, and also the primary source for the biblical liberation of woman. As Tavard further notes: "The first creation story of Genesis refers to *informatio*, the formation of man and woman as human beings related to God and *equal* to each other in this relationship; the second [creation in Genesis 2], to *conformatio*, the formation of man and woman as beings related to each other for the purpose of procreation and *unequal* at that level, the one being active and dominating, the other passive and subordinate" (114). One of the primary aims of Crenne's *Epistres* is to discredit the misogynist interpretation and use of creation as *conformatio*. She will even turn to the Creator himself for help in ridding man of his false "damnable opinions" on women's sexual and moral inferiority. Hélienne tells her husband: "Mais pour timeur [crainte] que remonstrances ne fussent suffisantes, pour extirper tes damnable opinions, m'en deporteray : & donnant repos à la fatiguée plume, le Dieu eternal exorera[y] [supplieray], que par grace especiale, de telle obstination [his previously expressed "jugement, que le sexe femenin, plus que le masculin estoit lubricque" ("opinion that the female sex was more lascivious than the male")] te libere [delivre]" (*Epistre invective* 3, K iii-K iiiii: "But I shall refrain from doing so [i.e., from continuing to write for the moment] as I fear that merely remonstrating with you would not be enough to root out your wretched opinions. I shall therefore give my tired pen a rest and pray God that He may liberate you from your obstinate opinions").

ordained by God, nature, or reason. It is socially derived and socially prescribed, and especially by certain misogynist advocates of Christian ideology — like H  lisenne's husband— who prefer to opt for the other story of creation found in Genesis 2.<sup>17</sup>

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The fact that Crenne reads, understands, and applies Scripture from a *different* perspective and that her sympathies lie with the *first* story of creation in Genesis can be seen in her feminist argument in the *Epistres* that women have always been involved in and accomplished "virile" works from the beginning of time. And what makes Crenne's feminism specifically "biblical" and distinguishable from other early modern feminist rhetorical practices is the degree to which she is forever turning to and appropriating the Bible in order to "authorize" her feminist ideology and narratives, especially her use of the meaning of creation in Genesis 1 as the justification for her kind of "equality" feminism. Indeed, what better way to discredit and debunk the misogynist principle with its biblical mandate for female inferiority and subordination than by documenting the successes of its object of scorn and ridicule in the biblical achievements of woman. One of Crenne's best accounts of women "exerceant oeuvres viriles" ("exercis-

<sup>17</sup> The proponents of the "male-first" perspective from Matheolus to Du Pont and including H  lisenne's epistolary husband always subscribe to the "Adam-then-Eve" story of creation in Genesis 2 and to Paul's "authoritative" pronouncements on it, his instruction that woman thus be subject to man: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man)" (1 Corinthians 11:7-9). On the other hand, Augustine's understanding of creation, Paradise, and of woman's place in it is more positive toward women. He does not believe, nor does Crenne, in two creations of unequal value (in *conformatio* associated with Genesis 2). Augustine subscribes to *informatio*, to the "simultaneous" and thus equal creation of man and woman found in Genesis 1. This at least is what he proposes in *De Genesi ad litteram*, VI, 5, 8, his discussion of the "original creation": "It cannot be said that the male was made on the sixth day and the female in the course of days following. On the sixth day it is explicitly said, *Male and Female He made them, and He blessed them*, and so forth, and these words are said about both and to both" (1:183). See also Tavard, 113-18 for a discussion of Augustine on Genesis 1-2: "In Paradise, as depicted by the bishop of Hippo, man and woman were to cooperate (primarily for the purpose of procreation), but without any inferiority of the female, or any submission of woman to man. They were called to oneness (*conjunctio*), not to domination and obedience," that is, to "a service of love (*dilectio*), not of slavery" (117).

ing manly tasks"), in addition to those portrayed in *Epistre invective* 3, is to be found in *Epistre invective* 4, which is her "commemoration des splendides [excellens] & gentilz esperitz, d'aulcunes dames illustres" (K iiiii: "commemoration of famous women with brilliant and refined minds"), a rich testimony to the powers of women in the ethical, cultural, and public domain. This testimony also shows, just as we saw in *Epistre invective* 3, her panegyric propensity to argue and to promote woman primarily through anecdote and example. Hélienne is specifically reacting to, rejecting, and reversing the misogynist view of Elenot, to whom *Epistre invective* 4 is addressed and who had prescribed "le filler" ("spinning") as the only activity in which women can and should excel (K v). This letter is the one singled out for praise by François de Billon in 1555 in his *Le Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe Femenin*. He comments quite approvingly on the way Crenne debunks "Woman's detractors" and the misogynist "Principles" of Elenot in particular: "Bien pourroit on dire pourtant, qu'en vn passage de son Liure touchant les Angoisses amoureuses, elle donne vne facheuse touche à tout detracteur de Femme, quand en vne Lettre qu'elle enuoya à un certain Elenot (qui maintenoit fort & ferme les Femmes ne se deuoir mesler que de filer) elle renuerse aussi plaisamment ses ironiques Raisons" (35v-36).

Of the "virile" or "manly" achievements of exemplary women extolled by Crenne through her consciousness-raising memorial discourse in *Epistre invective* 4, the following deserve special mention: "les filles de Lelius, & celles de Hortensius (tres fameulx orateurs) [qui] rendirent par leurs scavoirs, l'elegance de leurs peres singulierement recommandée" ("the daughters of Lelius and Hortensius [both very famous orators] [who] made the elegant style of their fathers singularly attractive"); "Damas fille de Pitagoras [qui] fut si tres perite & scavante en Philosophie, qu'apres que les troys seurs eurent coupé le fil vital à son pere, elle exposoit les difficultez de ses sentences" ("Pythagoras' daughter Damas [who] was so expert in philosophy that after the Fates had recalled her father from this life she commented on the most obscure points of his maxims"); "la royne Zenobia [qui] fut telement instruite par Longin philosophe, que pour l'habondante & reluysante science des escriptures, fut nommée Ephinisa: dont Nicomachus translata les saintes & sacrées oeuvres" ("Queen Zenobia [who] was so instructed by Longinus the philosopher that she was named Ephinisa for her wide-ranging and brilliant knowledge of literary texts. [Nichomachus translated her sacred writings]"); "en Grec Delbora [qui]

fut tant prudente & discrete, que comme l'on lit au livre des Juges, pour quelque temps exerça l'office de judicature, sus le peuple d'Israel" ("Deborah [who] was so well-versed in Greek that, as we read in the Book of Judges, she exercised the office of magistrate over the people of Israel"); "la royne Attalia [qui] regna, & jugea l'espace de sept ans en Hierusalem" ("Queen Athalia [who] reigned and judged seven years in Jerusalem"); "Valerie vierge Romaine [qui] fut si experte en lettres Grecques & Latines, qu'elle explicqua les vers & metres de Virgille, à la foy & aux misteres de la religion chrestienne" ("Valeria, a Roman virgin, [who] was so well versed in Greek and Latin literature that she explicated Virgil's metrics and verses in the light of the mysteries of the Christian faith"); "Aspasia [qui] fut de si extreme scavoir remplie, que Socrates philosophe tant estimé, ne fut honteux d'apprendre quelque science d'elle" ("Aspasia [who] was filled with such great knowledge that Socrates did not blush at learning anything from her"); and "Alpaides vierge & religieuse [qui] fut de la grace divine tant illuminée, qu'elle eust le sens des livres de la sainte Bible" ("Alpaides, a virgin and nun, [who] was so filled with divine grace that the meaning of the books of the Bible was revealed to her").

Crenne's majestic "commemoration of famous women with brilliant and refined minds" culminates in the figure of the "tresillustre & magnanime princesse, ma dame la royne de Navarre" ("the most illustrious and distinguished princess, the queen of Navarre"), in whose "reginale [Royale], excellente & sublime personne, reside la divinité Platonique, la prudence de Caton, l'eloquence de Cicero, & la Socratique raison" ("[whose] royal and lofty person combines Plato's godlike wisdom, Cato's prudence, Cicero's eloquence, and Socrates' wisdom"). For Crenne, it is the "splendeur" ("brilliance") of the women she has just championed — Marguerite in particular — that truly "à la condition femenine donne lustre" ("enhances all of woman-kind") (K vi-K vii). Combining biblical evidence with argumentative conviction and rhetorical skill, Crenne has once again affirmed woman's moral, intellectual, and cultural equality, and at times her superiority to men. There are many other narratives in the *Epistres*, however, which provide further evidence as to the singular honors and achievements accorded to women by God and the Bible. Crenne is dedicated to recording these achievements, especially since she is convinced that her views on women were authorized by and endowed with "la faveur de Dieu" (A iii: "God's approval") and that they represented true "Evangelicques parolles" (C vi: "words of the

Gospel"). She overwhelms her misogynist adversary (as well as her reader) with all these memorial words on woman, with all her examples of good, intelligent, achievement-oriented women.

In each of the above examples, most of them culled from female biblical archetypes, Crenne admires the capacity of women to be exceptionally active and productive, and their ability to teach both women *and* men, and to be "non seulement digne[s] d'estre imitée[s] des femmes: mais aussi des hommes" ("worthy to be imitated not only by women but by men"), as Crenne had said of Judith (K ii). The words of Paulinus of Nola about women "becoming male" thus constitute an apt commentary on each of Crenne's viragoes "exerceant oeuvres viriles," and especially on the biblical and religious ones who make up a majority of her examples in the above passage, as elsewhere in her letters: "What a woman she is, if it is permissible to call such a *manly* Christian a woman!"<sup>18</sup> This is another way of saying, in the words of a recent book's Galatians-quoting title, that ethically and culturally speaking "there is no male or female."<sup>19</sup> Crenne agrees with such views on female equality, especially when it comes to human nature and female morality and accomplishment. Her portrayals of biblical viragoes who embody moral-ethical ideals and active accomplishment demonstrate this point clearly. Whether the characters include the woman/wife in Ephesians and Proverbs, Rebekah in Genesis, Abigail in 1 Samuel, Suzanna and Judith in the Apocrypha, and so forth, they all exemplify female behavioral and cultural models for whom "becoming male" or "exerceant oeuvres viriles" ("exercising manly tasks") means, in the true Christian sense of being and living, "to cultivate a religious identity" and to participate in a process "that will ultimately lead to eschatological fulfillment."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Miles, 53.

<sup>19</sup> See MacDonald. This study also subscribes, in its thesis on sexual equality, to creation in Genesis 1. See also Albistur and Armogathe, who quote Abbé Du Bosc (*La femme héroïque*, 1645) on the notion of sexual equality in Genesis 1 as the first principle of Christian and biblical feminism: "Le premier souci du féminisme chrétien est de restaurer l'idée d'égalité entre les deux sexes. La femme, dit le P. Du Bosc, 'ne doit pas être ni esclave ni maîtresse, mais compagne', ou encore: 'Les deux sexes sont également honorés de Dieu dans la création, faits d'une même main, sujets aux mêmes lois, et pour une même fin'" (132).

<sup>20</sup> Miles, 56. See also, on this process of "making the female male," Meeks, 194ff., and especially Tavadon on women called to male virtues and situations in spite of the conditions imposed on them by society and culture: "The more a woman has

Crenne's portrayals of biblical and religious viragoes are also without a doubt the most forceful testimony and dominant feature of her "feminist textuality," in the sense of Joan DeJean's definition of it: "The process by which the first female literary *tradition* [her italics] in France was conceived as the continuation of women's activity in the public sphere generated what I would term . . . an *écriture féminine*, writing not the body but the body politic and women's involvement in it. From this perspective, parallels between political and literary heroism become apparent . . . the strength of prowoman sentiment generated repeatedly, in a space where history and literature meet, what can be termed a *feminist textuality*."<sup>21</sup> There is no better example of this space and this textuality, where pro-woman sentiment, cultural history, and personal literature come together, than Crenne's *Epistres*. And there is no higher praise that a Renaissance writer can bestow upon her "heroines" than to portray them as viragoes. As Jacob Burckhardt reminds us in his discussion of "virility" and its application in early modernity to women: "The highest praise which could then be given to the great [Renaissance] women was that they had the mind and courage of men . . . . The title *virago*, which is an equivocal compliment in the present day, then implied nothing but *praise*."<sup>22</sup>

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Crenne's inversion of language, sex roles, and values in her depiction of forceful and strong women "*exerceant oeuvres viriles*" is also a continuation of New Testament literary strategies (1 Corinthians

progressed in Christian holiness—that is, the freer she has become from the curse and its consequences in society—the freer she is to follow paths that society does not usually recognize as legitimate feminine pursuits . . . . The more a woman becomes God-like, the freer she is to take positions of leadership, because on the one hand she can imitate equally well the Son and the Spirit in keeping with her charism of the moment [thanks to her creation in Genesis 1] and, on the other, she has risen above the demands and prejudices of society" (200).

<sup>21</sup> DeJean, 6. This feminist textuality can also be an "autogynography," that is, the "heterogeneous mixture of *discours* and *histoire*, to use Benveniste's terms, the personal and the historico-cultural" which is found especially in works like Crenne's *Epistres* containing an autobiographical dimension. This "mixture" functions to undo the male-constructed "binary opposition . . . that associated the female with personal and intimate concerns, the male with professional achievements." See Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in her edited volume on this subject; 8 and 11 for the above quotations.

<sup>22</sup> Burckhardt, 2:391-92.

1:20: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"; Mark 10:31: "But many that are first will be last, and the last first"). This biblical and, for Crenne, feminist strategy of reversal and disclosure makes woman the equal of man in every regard by replacing woman's so-called debility with positive, strong, and achievement-oriented qualities traditionally ascribed to the male sphere. (The appropriation and use of the masculine for feminine identity can likewise be seen in the masculine family name which Crenne, or rather Marguerite Briet — the real name of our letter writer — appropriates for *her* authorial signature. Her husband was Philippe Fournel, "seigneur de Crenne.") Crenne's *Epistres* therefore constitute a radical questioning of gender dimorphism as constructed in the traditional binary opposites man/woman, active/inactive, public/private, and, most of all, good/evil. The object of Crenne's questioning is certainly not to turn women "exerceant oeuvres viriles" ("exercising manly tasks") into men but to express the absolute equality between the two sexes in matters of gender relations. The "manliness" of Crenne's biblical heroines represents a transcendence of the sexual nature itself, with social and cultural reform as its goal. Crenne's project of equality feminism thus becomes one of how to write women into history, to design new conceptual frameworks (which are actually biblically old ones) that place women at the center of human nature and human activity, as well as at the center of historical examination. Toward this end, she gives us example after example of women "exerceant oeuvres viriles," that is, women going beyond their ontologically and culturally "limited" sex.<sup>23</sup> For Crenne, the opposition man/woman (good/evil) is not "natural," but social and cultural. She therefore seeks and finds heuristic models that embody and illustrate women's historical participation in social-cultural-ethical development, and thereby reconceptualizes history in the *Epistres* as the record and the experience of *both* men and women. Crenne's biblical and writerly project — indeed the shaping principle

<sup>23</sup> "Humanist thought thrived on example . . . . Example is historical and thus suited those who wanted to recover the wisdom of antiquity [and, we need to add, the wisdom of Christianity]. Example could be conceived as a tool of practical social change, as a guide to action, in keeping with the strong moral purpose of many early humanists" (Lyons, 12). Hampton similarly writes: "The fact that exemplars both embody ethical ideals and demonstrate practical action suggests the implicitly political and ideological aspects of the processes of appropriation and application of past to present" (16). Crenne understands and uses example/exemplars with precisely these notions in mind.



of her encomiastic and memorial art composed for "celles, pour lesquelles extoller tous vertueulx se travaillent" ("those whom all good people work to praise") — is her way of restoring women to an ethical-cultural history and of rewriting this history for them.

In her (re)telling of the biblical stories of Judith and other female exemplars, Crenne is bringing female beauty and chastity and female heroism into the public arena. The characters are used to serve a religious and political purpose, and obviously a culturally polemical purpose, since Crenne is retelling these stories for her own immediate, cultural concerns. Woman as Judith or as Abigail or as Deborah becomes here an important part of the feminist dialogue of disclosure connecting generations, connecting History as it *is* written in the Old Testament and History as Crenne would have it written and understood, and especially read, in the Renaissance. Her portrayal of Judith is one of many biblical stories and myths of female morality and heroism through which "what *she* has *done* will be told in memory of *her*" (Mark 14:9), and also, as Crenne puts it, through whose retelling "les histoires Hebraïques et Grecques sont décorées et ennoblies [anoblies]" (K iii: "Hebrew and Greek histories are honored and ennobled"). The Judith text, Hélienne tells her misogynist husband, is one of "tant de *veritables* histoires [which] à l'encontre de [son] inveterée malice faveur [lui] prestant" (K iii: "many examples from history with which to refute his inveterate ill-will"). It is one of her best feminist responses to the misogynist "jugement, que le sexe féminin, plus que le masculin estoit lubricque" ("opinion that the female sex was more lascivious than the male"). It is her way, finally, to "extirper [les] damnables opinions" ("root out the wretched opinions") of her husband and to beseech "le Dieu eternal . . . que par grace especialle, de telle obstination [le] libere" (K iii-K iiiii: "God . . . that He may liberate him from his obstinate opinions").<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Very close to Crenne in biblical, feminist spirit and purpose is Georgette de Montenay (*Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes*, 1571), who also "conveyed a refusal of the largely negative and restrictive images of women touted by the [misogynist] authorities of her time, proposing in its stead her own vision of a superior feminine identity and more equal gender relations" (Matthews Grieco, 868). The only difference between Crenne and Montenay is the latter's emphasis of "a *superior* feminine identity." Crenne does not really opt for "superiority" feminism. She does not develop the "model of educated and spiritually *superior* womankind" (795). She is more interested in "equality" feminism, and committed to proposing egalitarian models between the two sexes. Woman's superiority was, however, widely argued for in the Renaissance

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Although we have discussed several of Crenne's letters, we have focused in this essay on her *Epistre invective* 3 because it is truly her best assessment, and ultimate refutation, of the misogynist position on woman's nature and her moral worth. This feminist assessment always begins with the misogynist principle itself, with the "jugement, que le sexe féminin, plus que le masculin estoit lubricque" (K iii<sup>v</sup>: "opinion that the female sex was more lascivious than the male"). Is it true, Hélienne asks herself in this letter, posing the same question that Pizan had previously asked, that women are "infideles, inconstantes, frauduleuses & deceptives" (I v<sup>v</sup>: "unfaithful, inconsistent, fraudulent, and deceptive") as men over the centuries have written? Using the reasoning and scholarly power of a woman, Crenne portrays the

and afterwards (cf., in addition to Montenay, Charles Estienne, *Que l'excellence de la femme est plus grande que celle des hommes*, 1553; Marie de Romieu, *Bref discours que l'excellence de la femme surpasse celle de l'homme*, 1581; Jacqueline Guillaume, *Les Dames illustres où par fortes et bonnes raisons, il se prouve que le sexe féminin surpasse en toutes sortes de genres le sexe masculin*, 1665; among others). But on the subject of gender preference, Crenne was more in tune with profeminist writers like Marie de Gournay, who would also argue for woman's *equal* status: "La plupart de ceux qui prennent la cause des femmes, contre cette orgueilleuse préférence que les hommes s'attribuent, leur rendent le change entier: renvoyant la préférence vers elles. Moi qui fuis toutes extrémités, je me contente de les *égaler aux hommes*: la nature s'opposant pour ce regard autant à la supériorité qu'à l'infériorité" (61). Crenne is the link connecting Pizan with later writers like Gournay and Louise Labé, who too would plead, if not for female superiority, at least for equality: "[le] bon vouloir que je porte à notre sexe, de le voir non en beauté seulement, mais en science et vertu passer ou *égaler* les hommes: je ne puis faire autre chose que prier les vertueuses Dames d'eslever un peu leurs esprits par-dessus leurs quenouilles et fuseaus, et s'employer à faire entendre au monde que si nous ne sommes faites pour commander, si ne devons nous estre desdaignées pour compagnes tant es affaires domestiques que publiques, de ceus qui gouvernent et se font obeïr" (41-42). For Crenne's position on "spinning," the oppressive symbol referred to by Labé and used by most if not all misogynists to keep woman in her place, see *Epistre invective* 4: "Et parlant en general tu dis que femmes sont de rudes & obnubilez esperitz: parquoy tu concludz, que autre occupation ne doit avoir que *le filer*: Ce m'est une chose admirable de ta promptitude, en ceste determination. J'ay certaine evidence par cela (que si en ta faculté estoit) tu prohiberois le benefice literaire au sexe féminin: L'improperant de n'estre capable des bonnes lettres" (K v<sup>v</sup>: "And speaking in general terms, you say that women are rough and benighted people; and you conclude that their one and only pastime should be to spin. I admire the haste with which you come to this conclusion. I have good reason to believe that if things were left up to you, you would deny women the privilege of pursuing literature, as they are incapable [so you say] of writing well").

"chastity" of very exemplary and active biblical women in a way that deconstructs the male hypothesis. But there is more to Crenne's position in *Epistre invective* 3. She will use the invective not only in defense of women, but in the attack of men. The study of ancient history and of the Bible in particular enables Crenne to conclude that men, when it comes to morality and deception, have no reason to be so self-righteous. Man is clearly more than capable of abandoning reason and embracing sensuality (I vii: "derelinquant [delaissée] la raison, à la sensualité adhère"), and even of committing rape (I vii: "à perpétrer violement l'adultère"). Sexual morality, good or bad, is an individual matter, not a gender matter. Crenne's rejection of abusive male generalizations on woman's sexual depravity (I iii: "l'injure universelle" of Hélienne's husband who "ne se peult garder d'increper [de detracter] en general la condition muliebre" ["incriminates and slanders all of womankind"]) is her rejection of the misogynist double standard on sexual morality. It is her protest against the double standard of sexual behavior, which freely gives to man what woman is severely chastised for.

Crenne was not alone in rejecting this male standard. It had also been rejected by the Christian humanist Juan Luis Vives in his *De institutione foeminae christianae* published in Antwerp in 1524 and in Paris in French translation in 1542. Crenne sides with Vives and echoes his views in her own feminist argument, which simply repeats the Christian truism (cf. Ambrose, *De Abraham*, I, 35) that all sexual violation is a sin and that what is not allowed to women is also not allowed to men. For both Crenne and Vives, the behavior of "perverse" women is not proof that all women are "wicked." Vives writes: "Si plusieurs en y a de perverses, cela n'argue ny monstre la malice de la nature, non plus que des hommes, entre lesquelz plusieurs sont larrons, meurtriers, faulx & desloyaulx. Entre iceulx aucuns ont escript par leur curiosité invectives contre le sexe féminin, qui les devoient attribuer à tous les deux" (334). Besides, in the realm of "luxure" ("lust"), as Vives sees it in the exact opposite way from Matheolus, Du Pont, and Hélienne's husband — and as Crenne also sees it and documents it fully in *Epistre invective* 3 and just as fully in *Epistre familière* 5, which is one of her most accomplished invectives against "ce deceptif & frauduleux sexe viril" (C: "the deceptive and fraudulent masculine sex") — "les hommes sont plus brutaulx que les autres animaulx" (Vives, 339: "men are more brutal than other animals"). Crenne agrees completely. This is why she turns the

misogynist argument of female sexual depravity and aggression against the accuser, in effect answering invective with invective:

O que c'est une execrable iniquité d'homme de telle faulte [sexual deception] à la femme attribuer, veu qu'en cela sa secrette conscience le juge: & scait bien que luy mesmes toujours s'esforce d'estre le decepteur. Car depuis que l'homme par luxurieux desir, jecte ses yeulx impudiques sur l'honneste beaulté de quelque dame: il use de continuelle poursuyte, de sorte qu'il semble qu'il ne s'esforce moins de la subjuguer, que si par machine ou instrumens bellicqueulx, pretendoit à l'obsession d'une [à assieger une] cité. (I vii-I vii<sup>v</sup>: What a shameful injustice it is for men to fault women for deception when in their heart of hearts men know that they are always the ones doing the deceiving. From the moment a man casts a lustful eye on the genuine beauty of a woman's face he is in constant pursuit of her and tries to conquer her no less persistently than if he were besieging a city with war machines.)

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We will draw this discussion of Renaissance misogyny and Crenne's biblical feminism to a close by returning to where we began — to Christine de Pizan's project to discredit and debunk the anti-feminism of the cleric Matheolus and all those like him, and to Pizan as the spiritual feminist model for Crenne. Crenne's own view in the above passage of a "besieged *cité*" is a clear reference to and sure indication of her desire to continue the work of Pizan and her *Cité des Dames*. The works of both authors are a defense of the female sex against the "damnable opinions" and the misogynist "obstination . . . d'aulcuns, pour avoir detracté des Dames" (K iii<sup>v</sup>: "insistence . . . of certain men who have spoken ill of women"). Pizan and Crenne publicly challenge those who "ont le sexe muliebre contemné" (I vi: "have slandered the female sex," with the verb "contemner," as we have seen, having the double meaning of slandering the reputation of and even sexually abusing women). Both writers construct a literary citadel for women — with the book serving as a "city" (Pizan's full title is *Livre de la Cité des Dames*), and as a feminist enclosure, an ideological and cultural space — in which women are protected from and can refute and withstand misogynist abuse and assault. The new "cité" or book envisioned by Pizan and Crenne is nothing less than the feminist concretization of their defensive attitude and response to misogynist warfare. It is to be both woman's "refuge" and her "rampart": "une nouvelle Cité qui, si vous en prenez soin, sera pour vous toutes (c'est-à-

dire les femmes de bien) non seulement un refuge, mais un rempart pour vous défendre des attaques de vos ennemis" (Pizan, 275).

Neither Pizan nor Crenne will, however, answer the question of whether the misogynist perspective that holds woman to be "foncièrement mauvaise et portée au vice" ("evil by nature and prone to vice") will ever be amended, or is indeed capable of being amended. At times, Crenne appears rather skeptical of such an outcome. In *Epistre invective* 5, Hélienne will address another misogynist who is so "endurcy en mal" ("hardened to evil") in regard to women that he "ne desespere de scavoir couvrir verité par mensonge : & coulourer mensonge par verité" ("never gives up knowing how to veil truth with lies, and color lies with truth"). Turning this time to Quintilian and Virgil, Hélienne concludes that this type of person "ne peult estre corrigé, car comme narre [recite] Quintilian, Tu romperas plus [beaucoup plus] que tu ne corrigeras celluy qui est endurecy en mal. Voyes [Voyez] doncques l'occasion pourquoy l'on ne se doit persuader, que jamais l'infelice [le malheureux] se reduyse" (L vi: "cannot be corrected. As Quintilian says, one can more easily break than correct the man who is hardened to evil. This is why one should not think it possible for wretches to reform").<sup>25</sup>

But such a doubtful outcome in no way keeps Crenne from writing, or from trying to reason with the proponents of misogyny in order to bring about a change of attitude and feelings. Crenne refuses to give up the cause of woman. The misogynist in *Epistre invective* 4, like Hélienne's husband in *Epistre invective* 3, is fervently implored to change his ways. Hélienne's exhortation to him is simply to confess his error toward "ce gracieux sexe femenin" ("the gracious female sex"). After all, this amendment is what Scripture, along with reason and conscience, also calls for: "O [Or] medite [penses] doncques de confesser l'offense que tu as perpetrée envers ce gracieux sexe femenin, qui par l'eglise est appellé devotieux. Si tu peulx faire ce dont je te exhorte [prie], bien t'en trouveras: car raison le veult, honnesteté le consent, & conscience le commande" (L ii-L iii: "Why don't you seriously consider a public admission of the offense you have done to

<sup>25</sup> See Quintilian, I, iii, 12. Having relied on Virgil (*Georgics*, II, 272, 13: "Adeo in teneris consuescere multum est"), Quintilian draws this conclusion, which Crenne adopts: "Frangas enim citius quam corrigas, quae in pravam induruerunt" (58).

the gracious female sex, which the Church itself calls devout? If you succeed in doing so, as I urge you to, you will feel better. Reason calls for it, honesty consents to it, conscience ordains it"). Since the reception of Hélienne's pleas and the desired change in attitude on the part of the misogynist type are indeed uncertain, Crenne must therefore remain, as she sees it, ever vigilant to counter his harsh, abusive words with her own, and to combat the misogynist "anticque folie" if it persists in the future. Hélienne goes on to "reassure" the misogynist in *Epistre invective 4*: "si . . . tu persiste en ton anticque folie, qui seroit cause de faire esmouvoir la *fureur* de ma *plume* : laquelle me stimuleroit de t'escripre [te rescrire] propos plus facheulx, que tu ne pourroys precogiter" (L iii: "if . . . you persist in your usual madness, this would only serve to release the fury of my pen and make me write things more irritating than you could possibly predict").<sup>26</sup>

Crenne is dedicated, as Pizan had been before her, to an activist biblical feminism that promotes woman's moral worth along with her intellectual and cultural equality. She is committed to spreading the gospel on woman, even if it means wielding the pen as a sword, as she has Hélienne warn the misogynist above in the closing passage from *Epistre invective 4*. Crenne's "fureur de [l]a plume," the feminist fury of her pen as sword, is a figurative expression and a most formidable instrument for dispensing afflictive judgments, just as the pen is in Leviticus 26:27-28 ("And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me, but walk contrary to me, then I will walk contrary to you in *fury*, and chastise you myself sevenfold for your sins"), and again in Ezekiel 5:13 ("Thus shall my *anger* spend itself, and I will vent my *fury* upon them and satisfy myself"). In the context of Crenne's biblical feminism, the word of God likened to a sword is, finally, not unlike the words of Crenne in defense and in praise of woman and this author's divinely inspired *fury* or purpose. Her words, too, are penned to "approver [prouver] faulse l'accusation, qu'[il] fai[t] de noz malicieuses oeuvres" (I v-I v<sup>v</sup>: "to refute his incrimination of what he calls our malevolent

<sup>26</sup> Of the "two general categories" proposed by Jordan as comprising the Renaissance literature in defense of women, the second one is where Crenne's *Epistres*, her "propos plus facheulx," clearly belong: "the second — overtly feminist — is devoted to securing for women a status equal to that of men" (11).

deeds"). For Crenne, women deserve to be remembered and recorded differently, not through "detractions, opprobres & injures" (I v: "slander, rage and insult") but "par louenge triumphale, & par canticques perpetuelz" (K ii: "with triumphal song and perpetual hymns and canticles"). Crenne's *Epistres* are these highly biblically inspired, feminist "*canticques perpetuelz*."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For more discussion of Crenne's "fureur de [l]a plume," see the essay by Nash, 1997. Crenne's biblical humanism-feminism, which is conveyed through what she calls her "*canticques perpetuelz*," is related there both to the tradition of the Christian letter (Paul's in particular) and to Thomas Sébillet's *Art poétique français* and his discussion of the *cantique's* double rhetoric of praise/invective, the rhetoric of "prière ou détestation" or of "louanges et invectives" as he calls it.

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