

SYMPHORIEN CHAMPIER

The Ship of Virtuous Ladies



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Introduction

The Ship of Virtuous Ladies as “Other Voice”: An Overview

One of the first printed defenses of women in France, Symphorien Champier’s groundbreaking book *The Ship of Virtuous Ladies* (*La nef des dames vertueuses*) helped launch the French Renaissance version of the *querelle des femmes*, the debate over the nature and status of women.¹ The book was first printed in Lyons in 1503 by Jacques Arnoullet, and was printed two more times in the sixteenth century, with some changes. It has not been translated, and the only other printing of the full book is Judy Kem’s relatively recent 2007 French edition.²

Champier dedicates the tract to Anne of France (1461–1522), also known as Anne of Beaujeu, daughter of King Louis XI and duchess of Bourbon by her marriage to Duke Peter II. He does so in part to offer advice for her young daughter Suzanne but also to obtain patronage or employment at the Bourbon court. The book begins with a verse prologue in which Lady Prudence appears as a vision to the young writer one morning and calls him to write the book so that all the negative statements that have been made about women can be corrected. She is accompanied by, among other women, Anne of France herself. The following four books are discrete sections and do not directly relate to each other.

The opening of book 1 offers some of Champier’s most pro-woman arguments in the entire *Ship of Virtuous Women*.³ Explaining how man and woman are biologically complementary and necessary for each other’s survival, he invites men to reconsider the evil things that they have said about women and to consider how their own presuppositions about men and women have led them to speak badly. Above all, they should see that men have committed more evils than women: “When you have noticed and considered the evils committed by men, you will not have cause to transfer those evils to women, nor to blame them” (40). Men with their “venomous tongue[s]” have essentialized all women as evil or vicious instead of taking them on a case-by-case basis. After this short

1. In their important book on French feminism, in their chapter on the sixteenth-century version of the *querelle des femmes*, Albistur and Armogathe list Champier’s text first in their table of works. See Maité Albistur and Daniel Armogathe, *Histoire du féminisme français*, vol. 1: *Du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1977), 81.

2. Symphorien Champier, *La nef des dames vertueuses*, ed. Judy Kem (Paris: H. Champion, 2007). Wadsworth published an edition of only book 4 in 1962: Symphorien Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, ed. and trans. James B. Wadsworth (The Hague: Mouton, 1962). I am grateful to both of these excellent editions, and cite Kem and Wadsworth’s commentaries when appropriate.

3. All references to the English translation of Champier’s *Ship of Virtuous Ladies* that follows in this volume will be given in parentheses in the narrative.

2 Introduction

introduction, most of the rest of book 1 is composed of a lengthy series of examples of “admirable deeds, virtues, and accomplishments of ancient women” (44). By offering example after example of women’s noble deeds and characters, Champier aims to transform men’s perception of their assumed inferiority. With his catalogue of famous women, Champier follows in the footsteps of Giovanni Boccaccio, whose *Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*, 1361–1362) was itself an even lengthier catalogue of women mostly from the ancient world. Champier adapts the text of many of Boccaccio’s descriptions of women and adds in Old Testament and Christian women (most notably, Joan of Arc). Taking Boccaccio’s *Famous Women* as a model was not an oddity in the period: the book functioned as what Stephen Kolsky calls an “architext,” or “a definitive model for those subsequent writers and compilers who sought to justify ‘famous women’ as a worthy concept and theme.”⁴ By including his own catalogue, Champier makes a version of Boccaccio’s descriptions more accessible to a French-speaking public, even as his Italian predecessor’s text circulated widely in French translation in both manuscript and printed form.⁵ Champier adapts a number of other descriptions from other sources, especially from the Old Testament and Jacobus de Voragine’s thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* (*Legenda aurea*), a best-selling book of lives of male and female saints.

Book 2 of *The Ship of Virtuous Ladies* is dedicated to Anne of France’s daughter Suzanne to offer advice to her, and by extension to young women in general, about marriage. Born in 1491, Suzanne was twelve at the time of publication of the book, and she had been betrothed to Charles IV, duke of Alençon, for two years (since 1501) by her father, Duke Peter II.⁶ The book incorporates a variety of miscellaneous pieces of advice, inflected by Champier’s previous reading in medicine and philosophy. He argues that women should not be as subjugated to their husbands as children are to their fathers and that husband and wife should be equal in some aspects: “Man must treat his wife like his companion and his equal” (102). It includes some sections that seem unrelated to the topic at hand, such as diatribes on the evils of Jewish doctors and bad pharmacists. Most of the advice is meant for noblewomen rather than average or common women.

Book 3 (not part of this edition) focuses on the sibyls, ancient Greek prophetesses who were believed to have predicted in their oracles the coming of Jesus

4. Stephen Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 4. On the tradition of catalogues of women, see Glenda K. McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

5. The first printed edition of *Famous Women* dates to 1493. For more on the text in fifteenth-century France, see Brigitte Buettner, *Boccaccio’s “Des cleres et nobles femmes”: Systems of Signification in an Illuminated Manuscript* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

6. In the end, however, Suzanne married her cousin Charles of Montpensier, duke of Bourbon, in May 1505.

Christ. It is composed largely of French verse translations of, and accompanying commentary (“glosses”) on, the prophecies of the sibyls taken from Lactantius, especially from his influential early-fourth-century *Divine Institutes*. Champier’s French translation is two steps removed from the original text since Lactantius’s Latin prophecies are themselves translated from ancient Greek. There are also prophecies from Jean Robertet and Fillipo de’ Barbieri, but they receive little commentary. As a section of a pro-woman text, book 3 documents that women foresaw the coming of Christ and of Christianity.⁷ Certain ancient male writers were assumed in the Middle Ages to have been able to see the religion that would follow paganism and to have encoded in their writing signs of the religion to come. To include the sibyls’ prophecies about Christ in this book, then, was to prove that women, too, had the foresight to see beyond paganism and had the gift of prophecy, which connected them closely to God. The sibyls are also included in book 1 as part of the catalogue of notable women (48–49). A short section at the end of the book shows the direct correspondence between sayings of male prophets and those of the sibyls.⁸ After this material, the author includes as an insert or a preface to book 4, a letter in Latin to the Lyonese physician André Briau, Champier’s “most particular friend.”⁹ The letter expresses his love for his friend and describes Cupid hitting him with an arrow as the starting point of his spiritual love affair: “[Cupid] let fly at me that very sharp golden shaft with which he makes men the victims of love with so powerful an arm that it would not be easy to believe the size of the wound which that boy inflicted on me.”¹⁰

Titled “The Book of True Love,” book 4 is often recognized as a very important text in the history of the *querelle des femmes*, of Neoplatonism, and of the relation between them. It essentially imports to France the Neoplatonic philosophy of the fifteenth-century Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino.¹¹ His version

7. For more information on book 3, see Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 14–15; Judy Kem, introduction to Champier, *Nef des dames* (2007), 22–23; James B. Wadsworth, *Lyons, 1473–1503: The Beginnings of Cosmopolitanism* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1962), 117–23, 148–56. For the broad interest in the period in the sibyls, see Jennifer Britnell, “The Rise and Fall of the Sibyls in Renaissance France,” in *Schooling and Society: The Ordering and Reordering of Knowledge in the Western Middle Ages*, ed. Alasdair A. MacDonald and Michael W. Twomey (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 173–85.

8. Symphorien Champier, *La nef des dames* (Lyons: Jacques Arnoullet, 1503), 72r–73v.

9. Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 47, with a full translation of the Latin letter at 47–50. For more on the letter, see 14–26, and Wadsworth, *Lyons*, 156–60. The letter was not included in the 1515 edition, and is not included in this volume.

10. Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 47.

11. Earlier direct relations between Ficino and French thinkers, including Jean and Germain de Gonay, did exist. See Jean Festugière, *La philosophie de l’amour de Marsile Ficin et son influence sur la littérature française au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1941), 63–64. But much more than these men, Champier made Ficino popular in France and in French. Festugière writes: “the influence of Marsilio

of Neoplatonism had in many ways rejected the primacy of the body in favor of the metaphysical realm, but it had still been an almost entirely male-centered philosophy. Women are barely mentioned in Ficino's widely-circulated Latin *Commentary on Plato's "Symposium on Love"* (*Commentarium ... in convivium Platonis de amore*, 1484), and his philosophy does not really apply to women in the first place.¹² Champier, however, reads and digests Ficino and then does something highly innovative with his Italian predecessor's philosophical framework: he applies the idea that the body is less important than the mind or spirit to argue for the implicit equality of men and women. Already in circulation was the Augustinian idea that "the mind has no sex," and the theological idea that a woman in the afterlife could be man's equal once the constraints of the physical body were left behind in death.¹³ But Champier goes further. "True love," in his revised Ficinian framework, leads human beings away from the physical to the metaphysical world. A woman can thus leave behind her body, taken as biologically inferior, for a state where she is not inferior to man.

Toward this end, Champier offers three stories about "the power of love," the first being the power of a wife's love for her husband. If "love is nothing else but the desire for the beautiful and the virtuous" in this framework (121), then women can love truly just as well as men. For a woman to desire the beautiful inside of a man is to render her like an ideal man, who should in a Neoplatonic register desire the beautiful inside of another person. The desire for the beautiful and the virtuous begins with desire for the body or external form of another person, but that superficial desire is transformed into desire for a higher plane of

Ficino quickly went beyond this small circle of erudite men. Thanks to one of them [i.e., Champier], it would spread into French culture to the delight of the French" (64; my translation). Wadsworth calls *The Ship of Virtuous Ladies* "the first vernacular manifestation ... of Ficinian Neoplatonism in France" (Lyons, 160). See also Robert Valentine Merrill, *Platonism in French Renaissance Poetry* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), xi, who calls Champier "the first of importance" among Frenchmen who "early received the stimulation of Italian Platonism." Copenhaver writes that Champier "deserves our notice as an early reader of Ficino" in Brian P. Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition in Renaissance France* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 95. See also the comments in Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 13–14. For more on the direct relation between Champier and Ficino, see Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 27–35; Festugière, *Philosophie de l'amour*, 67–73; Edouard F. Meylan, "L'évolution de la notion de l'amour platonique," *Humanisme et renaissance* 5 (1938): 418–44; Todd W. Reeser, *Setting Plato Straight: Translating Ancient Sexuality in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), chap. 5; Isidore Silver, "Plato and Ficino in the Work of Symphorien Champier," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 55, no. 2 (1993): 271–80. Champier's first published work, *Janua logicae et phisicae* (1498), as well as *La nef des princes* (1502), display his developing interest in Ficino.

12. See Reeser, *Setting Plato Straight*, 108–13.

13. See, for instance, Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 23, who writes: "In the language of Renaissance political thought, she is a *persona mixta*: her natural and political self balanced by her spiritual self."

being and moves the desiring subject upward toward God, the ultimate source of beauty and virtue. Human love, then, has the potential to become a divine experience instead of a carnal one. Considering gender through a Neoplatonic lens that places little emphasis on the body challenges the widespread Aristotelian idea that a woman is a defective male. No body can be defective when love moves bodies away from the physical world toward the divine. In marrying Ficino and a pro-woman stance, Champier does something very important for the history of the *querelle des femmes*: he sets the stage for later Renaissance thinkers and writers to consider that the sexes are equal via this version of Neoplatonism.¹⁴ As Edouard Meylan notes about Champier's book 4 in an important article on French Renaissance Neoplatonism, "the link between Platonism and feminism is already clear."¹⁵ Because he appropriates and transforms previous thinkers in a French-language context and spreads his version of pro-woman thought, Champier is an important "other voice" in early modern Europe, offsetting much of the anti-woman discourse that predated him.

The Ships of Symphorien Champier

Champier was born in 1471 or 1472, likely at Saint-Symphorien-sur-Coise west of Lyons, and died in 1539.¹⁶ He studied in Lyons, then in Paris in the Faculty of Arts.¹⁷ In 1495, Champier enrolled in medical school in Montpellier and finished his doctorate in 1504. This extensive training in medicine explains why he pub-

14. The classic overview on this topic is Festugière, *La philosophie de l'amour*. It is difficult to trace Champier's direct influence on later Renaissance thought, however. Of particular importance in this regard is Marguerite de Navarre, whose sophisticated Neoplatonism has links to her pro-woman stance.

15. Meylan, "L'évolution," 437 (my translation). See also Giovanni Tracconaglia, *Femminismo e platonismo in un libro raro del 1503: "La nef des dames" di Symphorien Champier* (Lodi: C. dell'Avo, 1922). Margolin sees implicit in book 4 medieval works on love such as Andreas Capellanus's *De amore* (On Love). See Jean-Claude Margolin, "Symphorien Champier," *Anthologie des humanistes européens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 212.

16. For good comprehensive overviews of Champier's life in English, see Brian P. Copenhaver, "A Brief Life of *Symphorien Champier*: His Career and Character," in *Symphorien Champier*, 46–96; and Judy Kem, "Symphorien Champier," in *Sixteenth-Century French Writers*, ed. Megan Conway, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 327 (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), 98–104. The classic biography in French is Paul Allut, *Etude biographique et bibliographique sur Symphorien Champier* (Lyons: Nicolas Scheuring, 1859). See also M. L. Holmes, "A Brief Survey of the Use of Renaissance Themes in Some Works of the Lyonese Doctor, Humanist and Man of Letters Symphorien Champier," in *Cinq études lyonnaises*, ed. René Fedou (Geneva: Droz, 1966), 27–54; and G. Tricou, "Le testament de Symphorien Champier," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 18 (1956): 101–9. For his thinking on education, see Christine M. Hill, "Symphorien Champier's Views on Education in the 'Nef des princes' and the 'Nef des dames vertueuses,'" *French Studies* 7, no. 4 (1953): 323–34.

17. See chap. 4 in Wadsworth, *Lyons*; also Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 46–48.

lished so many tracts on medicine over his lifetime and why there are references to medicine in *La nef des dames*, ostensibly focused on gender.¹⁸ Champier's career was marked by what Copenhaver calls "a medical humanism which distrusted Arabic learning and came to see Galen, Aristotle, and Hippocrates as the standards against which other sources of medical knowledge were to be judged."¹⁹ By the end of the fifteenth century, Lyons was a prosperous and bustling center of intellectual activity and of printing.²⁰ Here, Champier had access to a wide variety of ancient texts, a cosmopolitan population of thinkers, and proximity to Italy, whose influence looms large in his tract, particularly through Boccaccio and Ficino.²¹

The Ship of Virtuous Ladies is one of Champier's first books, published at the beginning of what would be a prolific French and Latin publishing career. By 1503, he had already published *Approaches to Logic and Physics* (*Janua logicae et physicae*) in 1498 and *Dialogue on the Destruction of the Magical Arts* (*Dyalogus in magicarum artium destructionem*) circa 1500.²² More related to the text under discussion here is his book *The Ship of Princes* (*La nef des princes*), which Champier finished in the village of Tulle in February 1502 and published in Lyons later in 1502.²³ The book treats in a rather traditional way the education of young princes, establishing his interest in offering advice to nobles about raising children, which he will extend to girls in his next book. Champier refers in the liminal poem

18. For a general introduction to medicine and Champier, see Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 66–81; and Verdun L. Saulnier, "Lyon et la médecine aux temps de la Renaissance," *Revue lyonnaise de médecine* (1958): 73–76. On Champier's work as a "correction of Ficino's ideas," see Giancarlo Zanier, "Platonic Trends in Renaissance Medicine," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 3 (1987): 509–19.

19. Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 67.

20. For an excellent discussion of the Lyonese cultural context, see chapters 1–3 in Wadsworth, *Lyons*.

21. On the specifics of the men with whom Champier had intellectual contact in Lyons, see Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 68–81. Richard Cooper writes that Champier's first trip to Italy was in 1506: Richard Cooper, "Symphorien Champier e l'Italia," in *L'aube de la Renaissance*, ed. D. Cecchetti, L. Sozzi, and L. Terreaux (Geneva: Slatkine, 1991), 234.

22. The latter text is translated by Brian Copenhaver and Darrel Amundsen. See Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 243–319. For a full bibliography of Champier's writings, see James F. Ballard and Michel Pijoan, "A Preliminary Check-List of the Writings of Symphorien Champier, 1472–1539," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 28, no. 4 (1940): 182–88. See also Kem, "Symphorien Champier," 98–99. Champier published a French edition of a medical tract by Gui de Chauliac under the title *Le guidon* in 1503.

23. Symphorien Champier, *La nef des princes et des batailles de noblesse avec aultres enseignemens* (Lyons: Guillaume Balsarin, 1502). The text was republished in 1525 in Paris by Philippe le Noir. For a modern edition of the text in French with German commentary, see Symphorien Champier, *La nef des princes: textkritische und kommentierte Ausgabe der Haupttraktate*, ed. Andrea Wilhelmi (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002). I know of no English translation of *The Ship of Princes*. Wadsworth discusses the text in *Lyons*, 105–30. The 1502 book includes, along with Champier's work, Robert de Balsac's *The Ship of Battles with The Route to the Charity House* (*La nef des batailles avec le chemin de l'ospital*).

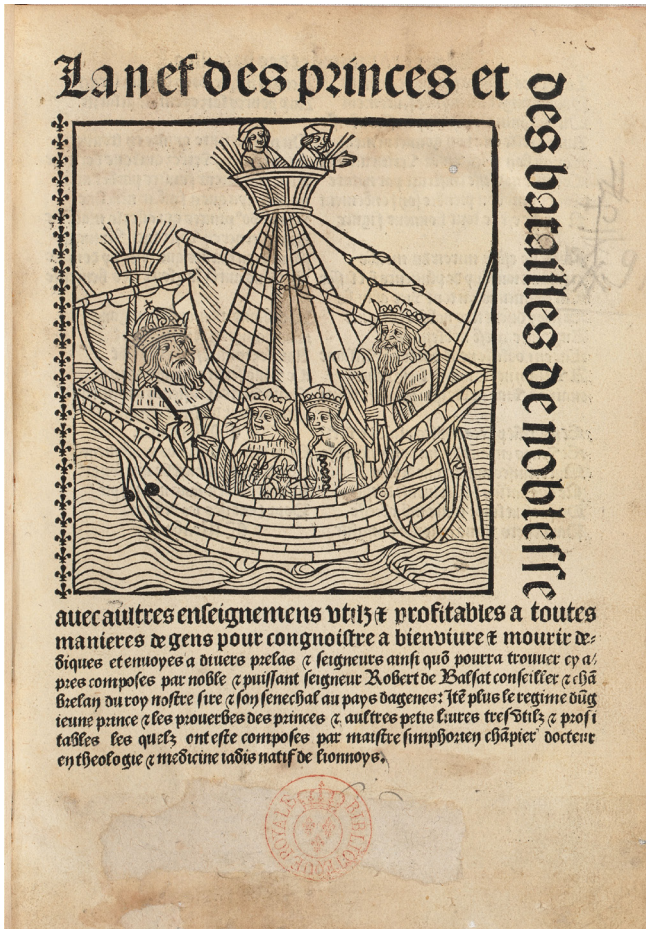


Figure 1. Title page of *La nef des princes et des batailles de noblesse: avec aultres enseignemens utilz et profitables à toutes manières de gens pour congnoistre à bien vivre et mourir dediqués et envoyés à divers prélas et seigneurs ainsi qu'on pourra trouver cy après / composés par noble et puissant seigneur Robert de Balsat,...* Item plus le régime d'un jeune prince et les proverbes des princes et aultres petis livres tres utilz et profitables / lesquels ont esté composés par maistre Simphorien Champier. 1502. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Rés. Ye-854, title page.

to the prince's "virtuous ship" that God will help keep free of vice if his book is taken seriously—a goal that will remain the same in his book on women.²⁴ The woodcuts on the title pages of his two "ship" books are similar, both representing vessels with passengers appropriate to the content of the book (see cover image

24. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), i[v].

and figure 1). Women are not absent from *The Ship of Princes*: there is a chapter on a prince's wife (book 2, chapter 5), which begins by stating that she should have a "beautiful body."²⁵

It is striking in light of the book that he would publish one year later that *The Ship of Princes* contains a section with statements taken from ancient writers about the "corrupted habits" of women, directly counter to the function of classical texts in *The Ship of Virtuous Ladies*.²⁶ Champier includes his own French translation of part of Matheolus's deeply misogynist, thirteenth-century *Matheolus's Book of Lamentations* (*Liber lamentationum Matheoli*), which he describes as about "the malice of women."²⁷ The translation lists a number of women and explains why they are malicious, including ones that he will subsequently include in his catalogue of virtuous women in book 1. Here, for instance, Dido is not meritorious for her devotion to her husband, but she "came to ruin" because of her "lust."²⁸ Champier presents the text to suggest that he does not necessarily agree with the ideas presented. He explains that Matheolus and others "took too much pleasure in saying bad things about [women]."²⁹ Champier includes his translation of Matheolus's text, he adds, not to say bad things about women per se, but to help readers "avoid problems that can occur because of [them]."³⁰ Anything that is "not pleasant" or is "critical" in the translated text should not be attributed to Champier, but to "Matheolus the bigamist."³¹ Still, to correct problems implies that women are a problem in the first place, and the inclusion of these texts themselves—whoever the author—is far from a pro-woman approach to gender.

This anti-woman sentiment raises a puzzling question: why would Champier write two different books in such a short period of time? Was he "converted" to a pro-woman stance? Did Matheolus even represent his views in the first place? One possible response is that Champier attempts to recuperate his own anti-woman stance as *The Ship of Virtuous Ladies* may complete, offset, or balance *The Ship*

25. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xviii[r].

26. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xlii[r] to xlv[v]; xlii[r].

27. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xlv[v]. Matheolus's text dates from about 1290. There is no English translation of the full text available. A French translation of Matheolus's text by Jean Le Fèvre exists from the fourteenth century (*Les lamentations de Matheolus*). For a selection in English from Matheolus via Le Fèvre, see Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 177–97. On dating of the text and on Matheolus's so-called bigamy, see Christine McWebb, ed., *Debating the "Roman de la Rose": A Critical Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 42n32. Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* opens with her response to Matheolus. See Christine de Pizan and Jean de Montreuil, *Debate of the "Romance of the Rose,"* ed. and trans. David F. Hult (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 235–36.

28. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xlvi[r].

29. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xlv[v].

30. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xlv[v].

31. Champier, *Nef des princes* (1502), xlv[v].