

**University of Chicago
Readings in Western Civilization**

John W. Boyer and Julius Kirshner, General Editors

5 The Renaissance

**Edited by Eric Cochrane
and Julius Kirshner**

*The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London*

"On the Vanity of the World and Especially of Women"

1425

This is the Sermon on Worldly Vanity, Particularly among Women.

*Odisti observantes vanitates supervacue:*¹ Psalm 30 [Ps. 31:6]. These are the words of David the prophet. In the vernacular they say: "You have hated those who needlessly observe vanities."

What these words mean is that God has always borne a hatred for those men and women who, through vanity, dress better than they should or who [think more about their dress] than about anything else. Oh men! Oh women! When you think about the evil you have committed, you will abstain from it, and in the future you will do no more. Many men and many women think they have done just this. But still God hated them in three ways, and for three reasons God now hates us.

In particular, God abhors:

First, curiosity: *observantes*

Second, the vanity in us: *vanitates*

Third, superfluosity: *supervacue*

First, God abhors us for our curiosity—for example, *observantes*, when men and women turn to new fashions. Don't you know that harlots are the first to have all fashions? Isn't this what David says? *Ibunt in inventione sua* [I left them to follow their own counsels. Ps. 81:12].

However, [the psalmist] says *observantes* [about the] great amounts of cloth that are tossed into sleeves and puffs and ruffles and broad fringes. Or about the *berzi* (elaborate, braided hair styles) on your heads. What is a *berzo*? It is something that will bounce you into hell. You will bounce right in just as a cricket sometimes jumps into the hearthfire. That's why he says *vanitates*. Many women will tell me, "I just do so to please my husband. I don't want him to take it badly if I don't do what he wants, and I'm just trying to keep him happy as best as I can." I answer, "You must help him, but not to ruin himself, and yourself too." And remember that a custom that takes hold of others will seem of great importance. Here is an example: There once was a man who emptied privies: that was his trade and his profession. It happened that once when he was in Venice, he passed by the druggists' shops. Surrounded by these shops and their many perfumes, he unexpectedly fell to the ground in a dead faint. A doctor was sent for right away, but he couldn't tell what was wrong with him. Other doctors were fetched, and finally one of them asked what his trade was. When he heard that the man was a privy cleaner, this doctor said, "Bring in some stable manure or some other stinking stuff." He put it to the man's nose and on his wrists and the man came to immediately because this was what he

1. *Supervacuas* in the Vulgate. Bernardino is using *supervacue* as an adverb modifying the participle *observantes*.

was used to. You laugh, but this is something to weep about! This is the stink of the woman who gets all dressed up, and who stinks to her own husband, but still she's never satisfied with him. This is [the stink of] the sodomite, who has no odor only among the dregs of society of sodomy. And I tell you, I am here to admonish you for your sins, men and women alike.

[God's] second abhorration: *supervacue*, [superfluous] assiduously. Take a look at the woman: over and above all her other vices, look at the *cioppe* (overdresses) in her coffers and hanging from her clothes poles, and all the coffers and the poles are groaning under their loads. You can see the poor, naked man, dying of the cold, and you're busy clothing your clothes poles! You will answer to God for this.

Third, [you are] changeable—that is, empty-headed—and there's no way to satisfy you. You're always moving, as the wind moves the leaves, as you can plainly see from your own experience. And look at how many sorts of heads there are: there are full heads, empty heads, and over-empty heads. The full heads are the ones filled with memory; the empty heads are [full of] willfulness; and the over-empty heads are [filled with] intellect. This is what God said: "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." With faith, with hope, and with charity. Let each one of you understand what you must, for this applies to everyone. All the people we have been talking about have empty heads, and Apocalypse 13 says that the empty-headed shall not come before God—that is, people who ignore the fasts commanded by the holy Church and fast instead on Marian or other feast days. Another empty head: whoever lends money at interest in expectation of profit. He thinks he will never die. And if you rise out of these vices, you will be thinking right, and [acting] with faith, hope, and charity. Your head will also be well filled when you say, "I have indulged in these vices, and in others as well, and I want to mend my ways with right thinking. I also want to fast, follow God's commandments, and do all things that please my husband. And if I fast, I will chase away vain thoughts of singing, playing music, and other dissolute pastimes. And this way I want to draw closer to good and leave off evil." You can see what pleases God and that is to do good works.

Here you have seen the curiosity and blindness of *supervacue*.

Why has God despised people who do these things? Only because this is the task of those who hold office or who chose officeholders, and for that reason I beg you to see to it that your city takes action [in these matters]. These are the reasons—vanity, curiosity, and superfluosity—for God's hatred toward you, because [such behavior] spites heaven, because it harms you yourself, and because it brings harm to your neighbor.

First, because it spites heaven. You will hear the seven reasons why you are all heading for damnation and are an offense to God.

First, by trying to improve on God

Second, by willfully refusing to conform to His will

Third, by buzzing in the temple of God

Fourth, by offending God

Fifth, by besmirching Mary in your praise of her

Sixth, by provoking the angels

Seventh, by setting the archangels against you

First, by trying to improve on God in his good and holy works. I am speaking generally, to men and women, young and old, humble and great, but more particularly to women than to men.

What do you think, woman: is it a sin or an insult to God to make yourself into something that you are not? As Cyprian² and Scotus³ say, according to Augustine in Book 4 of *On Christian Doctrine*:⁴ *Si quis pingendi artifex vultum aut speciem* [If an artist had depicted the face and form of a man], etc., if there were a most renowned and skillful master painter who made a portrait of Our Lady, or else a [picture] of her with her son in her arms—beautiful, well composed, pleasing and of pious aspect, and someone of less skill or who didn't know what he was doing attempted to improve upon the portrait by adding something, and if he then took an oven whiskbroom or his bare hands and set about rubbing the face, how much would he be wronging the master who painted [the face]? For He is the first painter and you, who know nothing about painting, are spoiling it. And you set yourself up against the will of God when you make a shame of the face he gave you, spoiling it with your smearings. Where you're white, you make yourself red, where you're red, you make yourself white. Where you're yellow, you color yourself, where you're curly, you make yourself cleanshaven. If you're big you belt yourself in until you burst, and if you're thin you pad yourself with cotton batting, and if you're short, you want high *pianelle* (wooden clogs). Whether you're dark or fair or however you are, you spoil the image that God gave you. And then they tell their confessors, "We do it to please our husbands." You're lying in your throats! And the confessors are fooled by you if they believe it, and they are fooling you by their generosity to you. That's why I beg you—so that you won't have to confess something that seems shameful to you—don't ever dirty up your face, either in your bedroom or in any other place. Don't make yourself appear beautiful in public and ugly at home. Do the opposite and I'll believe that you are trying to please your husband. Be ugly when you're outside your house, and make yourself beautiful at home for love of your

2. Cypr. *De habitu virginum*, c. 15 (PL 4, 455ff.).

3. Obviously, Augustine could not have cited an opinion of the fourteenth-century Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus. "Scote" is probably a scribal corruption of Ambrose whose teaching, together with Cyprian's, was cited by Augustine.

4. Lib. 4, c. 21, n. 49 (PL 34, 113ff.).

husband, and you will please him and content him in every way. And if you do the contrary, every bit of disgust you raise in him will push him into shame, to the harm and discontent of your soul and his own. When he sees that you get all dressed up to go out, he will immediately become suspicious and think that you aren't faithful to him, and then he'll fall into all the sins of sodomy, etc. This is why David says, *Abstitit regina a dextris tuis in vestitu deaurato, circumdata varietate* [Psalm 45:31. The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes she is led to the king]. Thus every star is in its proper place and often little is better than a lot. You can see that a peppercorn is intrinsically better than a whole heap of dung. I can also tell you that I know of few beautiful women who are loved—and who perhaps also love—or whose husbands are not always suspicious and jealous. So don't make yourself otherwise than the way God made you. If God made you beautiful, God gave you a great misfortune, if you only knew it; but if you know how to behave properly, you will be greatly rewarded in eternal life.

I'm talking about beautiful and ugly women alike. Certainly, God does not care more about the great than the humble, about young women more than the old; God loves without measure all who do his will. So don't try to improve on God. This is what Augustine says (just like Ambrose⁵ and Jerome⁶) in Book 4 of *Christian Doctrine* to those who change the face God gave them. How will you dare to appear before God? God won't even recognize you. As Saint Matthew says, *Amen dico vobis, nescio vos*, "truly, I say to you, I do not know you," because you don't have the face I gave you, because you have smeared it and dirtied it up to seem more beautiful than I made you.

Second, not conforming to God's will. When you say the "Our Father," pay attention to the phrase that says, *Fiat voluntas tua*. One woman says, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." She may say so, but see how she spoils what He has made. *Omnia in sapientia fecisti* [Psalm 104:24. In wisdom hast thou made them all]. Therefore, since you have been made by the will of God, why do your actions contradict what you say you want? Don't you see that in what you say—in the prayer you say that God's will should be done in earth as in heaven—you are twisting that prayer around? So you don't want [God's will] to be done, even in heaven. If your hair is falling out, it is perhaps all right to fix it so you don't look bald. Go ahead and do it, but don't overdo it. If it's the custom to go around with a full head of hair, you don't have to do so. However, don't deceive yourself. And don't change your hair color to gold or white: have the amount of hair and the

5. *De virginibus*, 1, c. 6 n. 28 (PL 16, 196ff.).

6. *Epist. 54 ad Furiam*, n. 7 (PL 22, 553).

kind of hair that looks like your own. And if you have [plenty of] hair on your head, why do you set yourself to making it blond, smearing it with so much stuff, drying your head in the sun, wetting it and drying it, wetting it and drying it? Don't you see how much harm this does? It leads to headaches, deafness, rotted teeth, and bad breath. Be content, like the canary, who may be tiny but still doesn't envy the ass, who is so big. Each of them sings in his own way, too, and the ass doesn't envy the nightingale for his song or the canary either.

Third, you make God hate you for your buzzing about in the temple of God. In church there is so much competition among these women, who are so tense that they seem to have mattress-beaters up their spines, each thinking herself the most beautiful. Oxen go plowing up and down and they all pull together, but each mother is just delighted when her daughter is courted. Oh you mothers! If you behave this way, remember that you will lead this daughter of yours to perdition, and perhaps you have already done so. Now just think how many evils were committed during the three holy days of Holy Week, when everyone ought to be weeping, and you were glowering at one another. Oh, how embarrassed I was! It seemed that these things were going on to spite God. You will say, "I wanted to show off my daughter." [Listen to this] example. There is in the world a city in which barefooted women are displayed and measured against a wall to see how tall they are. A man once came to take [a wife] there, and everybody measured her as was the custom, and when he had seen her, they asked him if she pleased him. He answered that he would think about it. At this point the woman said, "So this man says he'll think about it? He can just go and think about it all he wants, for I have thought about it and I don't want him, since he looks first and then thinks about it." To be sure, he was a short man, and she was half a *braccio* [roughly, an arm's length] taller than he.

Another man was interested in marrying his sister to someone, so he brought her to him so he could see her. Her charms were artificial (*lei era falsificata*), and when he realized it, he drew a knife and killed her.

Oh woman! You have already killed hundreds of souls with your face smearings, perhaps thousands. When will you ever repent? You there, you've sucked in perhaps a hundred young men; when will you repent? Solomon in chapter 7 says of the woman dressed like a harlot that she is wily of heart [Prov. 7:10] and lies in wait [Prov. 7:12], just as the Church attracts souls: *Ad capiendas animas*. She snared men like nightingales and chaffinches. And it doesn't even bother your conscience.

Fourth, don't you believe that Christ, the son of God, loves his father? Oh, when he sees so many great offenses to his magnificence, don't you think that grieves him? Why should that grieve God? Just because it is an offense to the Father. [Christ] came into this world to make peace be-

tween you and God, and you do just the opposite. You have been the cause of many shameful sins: usury, homicides, fornications, adulteries, and so forth.

Fifth, offense to the Virgin Mary if you have ever [profaned] a church or any other sanctified place: cathedrals, hospitals, etc. Don't you see that a church is [the same thing as] the saint to which the church is dedicated? Some who have been in the Holy Land say that no woman ever enters into a Saracen's temple while a man is inside, and when the men have left, the women come in. And all the men go barefoot and the women with their faces covered so they cannot be seen. And they pray to the devil with so much faith that they are sometimes off the ground in contemplation. When they hear of our ways they burst out laughing, and they're not far wrong. For my part, I think that more evil is committed in the cathedral on a solemn feast day than in a public place the whole week long. However, the minute they enter into the church, the Virgin Mary gives them her malediction when they act this way. It's the same for you, woman, when you enter the church with vanity: Mary immediately curses you. And let me warn you, don't ever go to a convent to amuse some nun, because when you leave the convent, she will swear at you and curse father, mother, and herself. For this reason, it's better not to go. Furthermore, you shouldn't put anyone into a convent who isn't eighteen years old; and if someone [younger] were put there, you should pay a certain amount [of dowry] for her. I don't want you meddling in these matters. Don't lay your hands on other people's forage, for it belongs to God. Leave to God what is God's, and you be master of your own affairs. Furthermore, I beg you, when country people come here, don't have them arrested for their debts. They come to the sermons to hear the word of God, and you have them hauled away for their debts! Be merciful!

Sixth, the angels despise you. Everyone has a guardian angel to watch over his soul, and when you do so much evil, your angel curses you. [All the angels] leave you and go away from you, and they curse the woman who was the cause of your bad actions as well. Souls are snared just like pigeons and doves, and the angels are just as sad about it as they are joyful over good [actions].

God, the saints, the apostles, and the angels all curse you for opposing the will of God; it is just as in this world when people love one another and one of them is hurt and they all despise the one who did the harm.

[My] second principal part [speaks of] you yourself. Now I want to give you the real medicine; what you have had so far is syrup. Regarding yourself, you will see seven ills.

First, the soul as the chamber of sins. If a woman is vain, she is a chamber of haughty superiority. Oh, how long they look at themselves before

they leave the house! If she is haughty, it leads to the sin of vainglory as she preens and plucks herself. When she sees that someone else is more beautiful than she, envy is born, and if she cannot rival her beauty, she is bitter. Then she wants more clothes than she has, and if she doesn't get them, she gets angry. Thus she wears herself out, and she loses weight because she doesn't get to the [social] rank she would like. Then she stimulates [her appetite] with things to eat and drink, she warms up to the idea, and then comes gluttony. One thing follows another and every sin is born in her.

Second, the waste of time. If you thought of how much time is wasted and put that much effort into the salvation of your soul, you would be better off than Mary Magdalen. Saint Paul says, *Dum tempus habemus, operemur in bonum*, "while we have time, let us do good" [Gal. 6:10]. Job says, *Breves dies hominis sunt*, "Brief are men's days" [Job 14:5]. He has but a short time to be saintly and good.

[Take the] example of a holy father who was observing the vanity of a woman and, seeing his own vanity (that is, his efforts had been in vain), began to cry out, Alas! Alas! Alas!, and said that she had gotten further in spreading evil than he had in doing good. When another woman who had been good became wicked, another holy father said of her: "How much time she spent in the good that she did, and now it is of no use whatsoever to her soul."

Third, you lose every prayer that you say. Every church office, every psalm, and every mass. Paul says to Timothy, *Non in tortis crinibus et vestitu pretioso* [1 Tim 2:9. Women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire]. All Lombardy has borrowed the custom of curly hair from Siena. Oh, woe to the person who started this fashion!

Fourth, you get yourselves all excited. Just like a bitch—when a bitch needs a dog, all the dogs come following along behind her. And when she doesn't, they don't. This is like a woman who can be known by her eyes, and you had better get it straight that more can be understood by acts than by words. David the prophet says of this, *Illi maledicent et tu benedices* [they will curse and you will bless]. [For] example, when you want to sell a horse in the piazza, you put straw on his head. This seems crazy to someone who sees this sign but asks "Is that horse for sale?" Someone who understands it will ask how much you want for the horse. This is what happens when a woman dresses in finery and adorns herself: she is for sale to lovers. Sometimes it's the mother who beautifies her and dresses her up, and that beautifying is what arouses love in the girl's lover. And the mother is a procuress for having beautified her that way.

Fifth, when a woman is vain, what you should do is think about providing a dowry, not satisfy her [wishes] with all the clothes she wants. And if

her husband has only meager earnings, he won't be able to eat except by her dowry, if it's a good one. So if she keeps all her dowry in her clothes chests, she may force her husband to enter into unfavorable contracts, because she has pushed him to spend beyond his capabilities.

Sixth, vanity often makes your will vacillate, for often it's like the blowfly that flies into a lamp and buzzes around and around. That's what a lover does: he buzzes around the vain woman until he finally makes her fall by promising, "I'll take you to wife; I love you so; you're the one I'm yearning for," etc. So don't ever believe anyone, because they'll all trick you and then tell everyone about it. And if in any way you give in, everywhere you go you'll be ashamed. Don't listen to a single word, for he will say, "I'll keep it a secret," but it won't be true. As it has been said, *Nichil occultum quod non reveletur*, "There is no secret that will not be revealed" [Luke 12:2]. There are many mothers who'll be happy with their daughters [when this happens] because then they will be married.

There was once a man who wanted to take a wife, but he wanted to trick her because she was rich. Every third day he changed an item of clothing [in the trousseau], until finally he went to see her to conclude the negotiations. When he saw her, he asked, "What do you know how to do?" She was a widow, and she answered, "I know how to spin, sew, and cut [clothes] as all women do." Then he said, "Do you know how to do anything else?" She answered that she knew how to run a household, supervise the children, sweep, etc. So he said, "Do you know how to do anything else?" She told him, "Oh, I know how to make bread." He said, "I'm satisfied; I'll take you." And so it was done. When he led her [to his house], he pawned enough things to buy a *soma* [91.2 litres] of flour. When the flour was finished, the woman said, "Go buy some flour because there isn't any left." He said, "Don't break our contract." She said, "How's that?" He answered that she had given him to understand that she knew how to make bread. She said, "That's why I'm telling you, buy some flour to make bread and I'll make it!" Then the man said, "Oh, I could have found fifteen women that I could have taken to wife if I had provided the flour. Even the baker would have made it for me." And for this reason, he rejected her.

There will even be some who say, "I will take you to wife" and will give you a ring. You can never dissolve such a marriage; if it is consummated, you cannot dissolve it. And if either of them ever wants to marry again, it will not be a legitimate marriage but adultery. Thus, you will have sought misfortune and you will have brought it on yourself. What does Jeremiah say? "That if this happens to you, it serves you right because you brought it on yourself" [Jer. 4:18]. God's mercy permits this. God says, [Ps. 83:16] "Fill their faces with shame." Why? For your vanity. And David says, *Dixit Dominus: Ex Basan convertam; convertam in profundum maris* [Ps. 68:22.

The Lord said, I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea]—that is, with greatest shame.

Another woman may decide, "I want to remain honest." The devil will tempt her, but she will resist and be determined to do good. Jeremiah says, chapter 2, "I am desperate" [Jer. 2:25], and I want to eliminate every evil thought.

The third principal part is out of respect for your neighbor, and it concerns your husband's soul. [God] says, "I will make him a helper fit for him" [Gen. 2:18] and he put [Adam's] body to profit. This is what happens when a man loves [his wife] too much. Likewise, you will see a woman is beautiful, but she is [as sharp] as Solomon's [two-edged] sword in Proverbs [5:4]. Thus she doesn't make up for the sin of not giving a good example. Thus she contaminates the other women with her scandal, for when one sees another wearing some new exaggeration, she immediately gets one for herself, just like a sheep.

[For] example, a man had to take some sheep across the sea, and when they had been far from land for quite a few days [the ship] arrived at a port. As they were approaching the port the sheep saw the land, and as ill luck would have it, one of them gave a jump and fell into the sea. All the others followed along behind and they were all drowned. This is what females do: if one could not do just what another does, she would die.

If you have loved your wife, she may say to you, "This is what I want! That's what so-and-so has! You don't love me! Now I see where your mind is! She's this and she's that! I'm prettier than she is! What kind of beauty do you call that? Now we'll see if what I've heard is true: don't you have enough troubles at home? You'd be a fine match for her! Now I'll just see what you think of me and if you love me!"

Similarly, if someone has stolen because of a woman, the woman who caused it all will have her share in the punishment. Do you know why? Because of those wide sleeves, without which you wouldn't dream of going out. And do you know what the devil says? He says, "I made him steal to make broad sleeves for my woman here." Another devil says, "I'll hold him fast so he won't give it back. Just leave it to me!"

Women's vanity is the destruction of a city, ruined by velvets and woollens, for if the same money were put into merchandise it would turn a good profit. But you keep it in your coffers along with your pearls, your other jewelry, your silver, and so forth. You know I speak the truth. Whole families are undone by the inordinate dowries that are given and that men taking a wife demand; if the dowry is not to their liking, they refuse to take her. This is why they give themselves over to the vice of sodomy, some to one kind of ribaldry, some to another, and every sort of vice is practiced. In this way, the population shrinks little by little. And in this way you lose

your soul, your body, and your goods, as you have seen. This is why David says, "Odisti observantes vanitates supervacue."

So, my brothers, work for the common good and for the welfare of our city, so that you will have grace here and glory in eternal life. Amen.