

# The Wise Woman – The Gendered Ideal of Marital Virtue (c. 1525)

## Abstract

A 16th-century woman lived under the authority of the men in her life. Unless she lived in community with other women – a practice that survived the Protestant reformation in Catholic lands but also in some Protestant ones in the form of Lutheran (but also a few Catholic) convents – she passed from her father’s rule to her husband’s. Still, the general conditions of women’s subordination to men were qualified both in ideal and in practice, and there is much evidence of genuine partnership between husbands and wives. The rapidly growing literature on the conditions of a happy marriage and on codes of virtuous behavior was directed at both sexes, to be sure, but not always in the same way. Many experiences were, of course, the same for both genders – starvation, sickness, and death. Still, in other aspects of life, rules and moral teachings were gender specific. This broadsheet describes the qualities of a wise woman and introduces rules of conduct for a virtuous wife. Modesty, piety, loyalty, and charity are among the virtues prescribed by the broadsheet.

## Source



Look at this figure, which signifies a wise woman; any woman who does as she instructs protects her honor well.

[Eyes]

I see as keenly as the hawk  
 And discern the honest from the false.  
 I guard myself both day and night

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From one who against my honor plots.

[Ears]

I shall not be discouraged  
From opening my ears  
So that they can hear God's word,  
Which keeps the pious on their guard.

[Right hand]

I will despise pride  
And behold myself in the mirror of Christ,  
Through whom God has redeemed us.

[Mouth]

Every hour, day and night,  
I wear a golden lock upon my lips  
So that they say no harmful words  
Or wound another's honor.

[Breast]

Like the turtle dove,  
I have a steadfast heart,  
Faithful to him who will be my husband.  
No fault of his will break my loyalty.

[Waist]

My waist is girded with serpents,  
As should that of every honest woman  
Who wants protection from the poison of scandal,  
From evil love, and shameful play.

[Left hand]

I shall serve the poor freely  
And thereby gain eternal life.  
No other thing that I can do  
Will bring this end about.

[Feet]

I shall go about on horses' hoofs  
And be steadfast in honor.  
And not fall into sin,  
Which, while sweet at first, turns bitter as gall.

Any woman who has such traits  
Will maintain her honor undiminished.  
And surely earn from God above  
An eternal kingdom in heaven.

Source: Anton Woensam, *Allegorie der weisen Frau*, woodcut, c. 1525. Rheinisches Bildarchiv, available online on Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AK%C3%B6ln\\_-\\_Anton\\_Woensam\\_Allegorie\\_der\\_weisen\\_Frau%2C\\_1525%2C\\_Druck\\_Wolfgang\\_Resch.jpg?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AK%C3%B6ln_-_Anton_Woensam_Allegorie_der_weisen_Frau%2C_1525%2C_Druck_Wolfgang_Resch.jpg?uselang=de)

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