VIVES AND THE EMARGINATI

Charles Fantazzi

It may seem strange at first to group together a work on the education of women and one on the relief of the poor under the rubric of the emarginati (I prefer this Italian word to the less expressive English “marginal” or “marginalized”), but to Vives’s way of thinking there was a strong similarity between the underprivileged status of women in his time, solely because of their sex, and the condition of the poor, because of their economic status. In the latter case Vives devised a practical system for dealing with the situation, which was to be implemented by the civil authorities, while for the amelioration of women’s lot he provided, as he says in his preface to Queen Catherine of Aragon, a set of practical rules of life. As a converso who had left his native country never to return, Vives was obviously sensitive to the plight of those who like himself found themselves on the fringes of society.

I. De institutione feminae Christianae

The De institutione feminae Christianae, while remaining fundamentally traditionalist, contains some attitudes about the status of women that are surprisingly liberal for the time. The very fact that he addresses the book to a female audience is unusual in itself, as is his strong assertion that in intellectual capacity the woman is the full equal of the man, and often even surpasses him. It is true that Thomas More had said this before him, especially in the letter to William Gonnel,1 a tutor in his household, but Vives expresses it more forcefully and more unambiguously. Likewise, he insists, when women have received the proper education and training, they have the same capacity for acquiring virtue as men do. Echoing the sentiments of the Roman Stoic philosopher,

Musonius Rufus, although he nowhere mentions him directly, Vives states that things that have to do with virtue ought to be taught to male and female alike. He emphatically dispels the inveterate prejudice against the *femina docta*: “Learned women are suspect to many, as if the mental ability acquired through learning increased their natural wickedness, and as if men should not also be suspect for the same reason if subtle learning is added to a perverse mind.” This is outspoken language for the early sixteenth century.

In his views on marriage in the second book of *De institutione* and in the *De officio mariti*, a sequel written six years later, Vives grants the woman a more emancipated role by assigning greater importance to the companionate aspect and mutual love of the marital relationship, contrary to the church’s teaching that the primary goal of marriage is the production of offspring. At the same time he exalts the authority of the husband in exaggerated terms, but this was an incontrovertible *idée reçue* of the time. Even a century later Swift would mock the generalized conservative views, which were still in fashion, of those who argued that

the great end of marriage is propagation, that consequently the principal business of a wife is to breed children...that she is to obey all the lawful commands of her husband, and visit and be visited by no persons whom he disapproves...that a humour of reading books, except those of devotion and housewifery, is apt to turn a woman’s brain.

It was not until 14 July 1976 that in Vives’s adopted country of Belgium women could celebrate the obliteration of the last vestiges of male dominance in new marriage legislation which stipulated that the male is no longer the head of the family and that power is shared equally between the spouses.

Vives’s treatise on the relief of the poor is a landmark in the history of social welfare. By the late fifteenth century social and economic changes had reduced a great segment of the population to the state of poverty. As the urban proletariat increased in numbers more and more, there were many people living at the subsistence level, barely able and often

---