

Christine de Pizan (1363-1430)

The Treasure of the City of Ladies: or The Book of the Three Virtues

How ladies and young women who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates

There is another condition of rank and of life than that of baronesses that pertains to ordinary ladies and young women living on or off their lands outside fine cities. Because barons and still more commonly knights and squires and gentlemen travel and go off to the wars, their wives should be wise and sound administrators and manage their affairs well, because most of the time they stay at home without their husbands, who are at court or abroad. They should have all the responsibility of the administration and know how to make use of their revenues and possessions. Every lady of such rank (if she is sensible) ought to know how much her annual income is and how much the revenue of her land is worth. This wise lady ought to persuade her husband if she can by kind words and sensible admonitions to agree to discuss their finances together and try to keep to such a standard of living as their income can provide and not so far above it that at the end of the year they find themselves in debt to their own people or other creditors. There is absolutely no shame in living within your income, however small it may be, but there is shame if creditors are always coming to your door to repossess their goods or if they are obliged to make nuisances of themselves to your men or your tenants or if they have to try by hook or by crook to get their payment.

It is proper for such a lady or young woman to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the laws related to fiefs, sub-fiefs, quit rents, *champarts* (in feudal law, field rent paid in kind to the lord), taxes for various causes, and all those sorts of things that are within the jurisdiction of the lordship, according to the customs of the region, so that no one can deceive her about them. Since there are a great many administrators of lands and of noblemen's estates who are quite willing to deceive their masters, she ought to be well versed in all these matters and take care over them. There is nothing dishonourable about making herself familiar with the accounts. She will see them often and wish to know how they are managed in regard to her vassals so that they are not being cheated or incommoded unreasonably, for otherwise it would be a burden on the souls of her and her husband until they made amends for it. Towards poor people a lady should out of love of God, be more compassionate than strict.

In addition, she will do well to be a very good manager of the estate and to know all about the work on the land and at what time and in which season one ought to perform what operations. She should know which way is the best for the furrows to go according to the lay of the land and according to whether it is in a dry or damp region. She should see that the furrows are straight and well made and of the right depth and sown at exactly the right time with such grains as are best for the land. And likewise she should know all about the work of the vineyard if it is a wine-growing area. She ought to make sure that she has good workmen and overseers in these duties and not take people who change masters every quarter,

because that is a bad sign. They should be neither too old, for they will be lazy and weak, nor too young, for they will always be larking about.

She is careful to have them get up early but she does not depend on anyone for it, if she is a skillful manager of the estate. She herself rises and puts on a houppeland (a long loose undergarment) and busies herself at her window so that she sees them go outside, for if they are lazy, the laziness will most likely be shown in an unwillingness to go out. She should often take time to visit the fields to see how the men are getting on with the work, for there are a good many workers who will gladly abstain from working the land and give it up for the day if they think no one is keeping an eye on them. Some of them are very accomplished at sleeping in the fields in the shade of a tree while letting their horses or oxen graze in the meadow, and then they say in the evening that they have done a day's work. The wise manager of the estate will be on the look-out for these things. Furthermore, when the wheat is ripe from the month of May, she will not wait for an unrealistically high price, but will harvest her crop, having it cut by strong and industrious fellows. She will pay them in cash or in grain, and when the time comes that they are harvesting the grain, she will be careful that they do not leave any wheat behind them or that they do not try any other tricks not mentioned before that such people are apt to get up to. The lady must likewise be attentive to these matters in the other work on the estate.

The lady should get up early in the morning, for in the establishment where the lady usually lies in bed until late it is unlikely that the household will run smoothly. She will busy herself around the house; she will find plenty of orders to give. She will have the animals brought in at the right time, take care how the shepherd looks after the and see that he is in control of them and that he is not cruel, for shepherds sometimes kill them in spite of the mistress or master. She sees that the animals are kept clean, protected from too hot a sun and from the rain and prevented from catching mange. If she is wise she will often go in the evening with one of her women to see how the sheep are being penned up, and thus the shepherd will be more careful that there is nothing for which he may be reproached. She will have him take special care at lambing time and look after the lambs well, for they often die for lack of attention. The lady will rear the young animals carefully and be present at the shearing and ensure that it is done at the right time of year. In areas where there are broad plains and grazing lands, she will keep a large herd of cattle and grow oats for them to eat, selling a little of it. She will keep oxen in the stable, from which she will make a handsome profit when they are fat. If she has woods, she will keep a breeding stock of horses there, which is a profitable thing for whoever knows how to break and train them.

In the winter-time, she will reflect that labour is cheap, and therefore she will have her men cut her willow or hazel groves and make vine props to sell in the season. She will set her young lads to cutting wood for heating the manor house, but if the weather is too inclement she will have them thresh in the barn. She will never let them be idle, for there is nothing more wasteful in a man or than an idle staff. Likewise, she will employ her women and her chambermaids to attend to the livestock, to feed the workmen, to seed the courtyards and work in the herb garden, even getting covered in mud. She and her girls and young women will occupy themselves in making clothing. They will select the wool, putting the best quality to one side to make fine garments for her and her husband or to sell if she needs to do so. She uses the coarse wool for little children and for her women and household. She will make

heavy table covers from the wool, and from the scraps she will have the linens trimmed that her chambermaids will spin and weave on winter evenings. They will also make many other things that are too long to list.

In flat, arable country there is a great need to run an estate well, and the one who is most diligent and careful about it, however great she may be, is more than wise and ought to be highly praised for it. This practice of running the household wisely sometimes renders more profit than the entire income from the land. For example, the Countess of Eu, mother of the fine young count who died on the way to Hungary, was very skilled in this. She was a wise estate manager who felt no shame in occupying herself in the perfectly respectable work of household duties, to the extent that the profit that resulted was worth more annually than all the income from her land. The praise of the virtuous woman recounted in the book of Solomon may be aptly applied to such a woman as this.