

# MEN AND WOMEN

A.D. 800s

---

*al-Jahiz*

---

During the eighth century, Baghdad became the capital of the Muslim empire and the scene of a cultural explosion in the sciences and the arts. Al-Jahiz was one of the most famous writers of this era. Though he did not come from an influential family, his reputation as a wit and a scholar brought him recognition, and wealthy patrons began to support his work. He wrote on many different subjects, including religion and politics. The following excerpt focuses on the relationship between men and women.

## **THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying**

What evidence does the writer give to support the claim that women are superior to men?

---

Our observations of the state of things here below lead us to conclude that the greatest of joys and the most perfect of pleasures is the lover's conquest of the loved one, the possession of the object of his wooing. The suffering and grief of the unsuccessful suitor are matched only by the joy and happiness of the requited lover. We have noticed also that the more profound the passion and the more smitten the lover, the deeper the pleasure and the greater the joy that result from success.

It may be argued that to triumph over a watchful enemy gives greater satisfaction than a distraught lover's triumph over the woman he loves. Our answer is that we have known powerful dignitaries and men in exalted positions willingly renounce the satisfaction of venting their wrath, regarding the sacrifice as a token of their superior nobility and rare tolerance and highmindedness; we have known them prodigally give away their most prized possessions, even to the point of begging themselves, because they put good repute above wealth and luxury; but we have never known a lover give up his beloved. . . . Men only ever give other men unimportant things, compared with what they give women; and when they scent themselves, trim and dye their hair and beard, put on eye-shadow, use depilatory, shave, and are meticulous about their dress, it is only for the sake of women that they take so much trouble, and solely on their account that they go to such pains. Likewise the only purpose of high walls, stout doors, thick curtains, eunuchs, handmaids and servants is to protect them and safeguard the pleasure they give.

## **Women's Superiority to Men**

Women are superior to men in certain respects: it is they that are asked in marriage, desired, loved and courted, and they that inspire self-sacrifice and require

protection. . . . An indication of the high esteem in which women are held is that if a man be asked to swear by God—there is none greater—and take his solemn oath to go on the pilgrimage to the House of God, or distribute his possessions as alms, or emancipate his slaves, all that comes easily to him and causes him no embarrassment. But let him be asked to swear to put away his wife, and he grows pale, is overcome with rage, protests, expostulates, gets angry and refuses—and this even if the oath be administered by a redoubtable ruler, if he does not love his wife or regard her highly, and if she be ugly, with but a scant dowry and precious little fortune. All this is the result of the place that God has given wives in their husbands' hearts. . . . God created a child out of a woman without the intervention of any man, but He has never created a child out of a man without a woman. Thus it is specially to woman and not to man that He vouchsafed this wonderful sign, this signal token, when He created the Messiah in Mary's bosom, without a man.

**Source:** Excerpt from *The Life and Works of Jahiz*, by Charles Pellat. Translated by D. M. Hawkes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).