

## CULTURE

# Was It Something I Said?

Five books by extremely engaging misogynists

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*Religio Medici*, by Sir Thomas Browne (1643). "I never yet cast a true affection on a woman," writes the revered seventeenth-century prose stylist whose exuberantly idiosyncratic account of his theology became a runaway best seller in his era. Woman, he declares, is the "crooked piece of man," and man has no greater misfortune than that he must commune with her to reproduce: it is "the foolishlest act a wise man commits in all his life." Sir Thomas, for one, would much prefer "that we might procreate like trees." His confession is still dubbed the "ideal portrait of a Christian gentleman."

*Samson Agonistes*, by John Milton (1671). Possibly the Great Poet's most personal work, this play about the world's first suicide warrior (an Israeli!) fairly bristles with harangues against the fair sex. The biblical Samson's fury is not unjustified: his goyish wife Dàlila has betrayed him to the Philistines in Gaza. But the venom of his tirades exceeds all measure: "Out, out hyena," he cries on the approach of his penitent bride. The "best men" are "beguiled" by woman, the "poisonous bosom-snake," he rages. It's hard not to think that Samson is still smarting from Dàlila when he brings down the festival hall over the Philistines' heads, killing himself and them simultaneously. It is equally hard not to hear Milton's pain behind Samson's: deserted for several years by his bride and hated by his daughters, Milton remains our most famous poet to publicly champion divorce.



*The Joke*, by Milan Kundera (1967; favored English translation 1992). A fascinating novel whose crude and unusual misogyny has been overlooked in part because of its author's longtime membership in the unassailable class of Eastern European victims. No doubt the narrator "loves" women on some level (sexual and ego-bolstering), but he especially revels in their creative humiliation—as when his chief lover emerges from an outhouse with her underwear around her ankles, shitting uncontrollably because of her accidental ingestion of laxative pills in the place of the pain pills with which she intended to kill herself. This is cruel stuff.

*Collected Poems*, by Philip Larkin (1988). Not as blunt or as bad as his private letters (little could be), Larkin's poems nonetheless flaunt a healthy amount of cynicism. "They fuck you up, your mum and dad" has been called the most famous line in modern poetry, but Larkin's oeuvre teems with lines far more dismissive still, particularly regarding womankind and man's attempt to relate to it: "Not love you? Dear, I'd pay ten quid for you: / Five down, and five when I got rid of you." Larkin's strength lies in his jarring honesty about sexual relations (and also about solitude, aging, dinner guests, and art), which makes his poetry always riveting, rarely reassuring, and only sometimes what one might call "right."

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, by Friedrich Nietzsche (1885). This frolicsome, offensive, piety-busting romp through philosophical inquiry is only slightly degraded by its easy sexism: "Everything about woman has one solution: that is pregnancy," says Zarathustra, Nietzsche's alter ego. Outside his immediate family, Nietzsche didn't have much experience with women (though he did spontaneously propose to a few, all of whom rejected him). So one can forgive him a great deal—even the silly, playful words he puts in the mouth of Zarathustra's instructor, a female sage: "You are going to women? Do not forget the whip!" (In one of the few photos of Nietzsche with a woman, he is pulling a horse cart and she is bearing a whip.)

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## Thus Spoke Zarathustra

By Friedrich Nietzsche

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## Collected Poems

By Philip Larkin

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## **The Joke**

By Milan Kundera

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## **Samson Agonistes**

By John Milton

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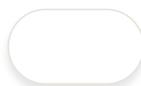
## **Religio Medici**

By Sir Thomas Browne

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