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Not Your Average Rose: Cultural Inversion in Pizan's *City of Ladies*

Le Livre de la Cité des Dames—translated into English as *The Book of the City of Ladies*—as an outstanding work of proto-feminist literature from 1405. It is written by a woman, in defense of women. Christine de Pizan plays the central character in her own work, in which she combats misogyny with a revised account of history. She battles prevalent ideals of courtly love and gender inequality as things that are not merely repulsive or immoral, but wholly heretical. Rather than focusing on historical accuracy, de Pizan uses the literary power of her narrative to expose and reverse the inaccuracies in traditional, male-dominated histories. In doing so, she elevates the substance of her argument by masterfully imitating a dominant storytelling medium of her day. The work overturns patriarchal violence by inverting the cultural, literary, and theological tropes of her day, establishing herself as an authority equal in intelligence and eloquence to any man.

De Pizan uses sexist conventions of her time as the problematic background for her story. Society casts women as, at best, objects of men's romantic and sexual conquests in the system of courtly love; at worst, hagglers, whores, or termagants who manipulate men and bring ruin upon society. To demonstrate the deep cultural and historical roots of misogyny, de Pizan alludes to the Greek poet Matheolus, who wrote, "Woman is ever riotous, gossipy, and full of spite; through her all peace is banished... My wife's tune is only gloom, she utters only maledictions and lamentations; she constantly curses, or fights and cries" (translated by Blumenfield-Kosinski 304). Ironically, Matheolus complains of his wife's incessant lamentations in a work titled *The Lamentations of Matheolus*. A relevant Medieval view of women comes from Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, a blunt allegory for romantic pursuit in which the storming of a stronghold represents a man's sexual conquest. The main character, known as "Lover," must invade the

“Castle of Jealousy” in which his love, the “Rose,” hides from him. In the final lines, the Lover breaches the castle walls and victoriously rapes the Rose. Without a trace of irony, the narrator tells the reader,

If you, too, should have a chance to go...
 To pluck a full-blown flower or tight-closed bud,
 Then you so wisely may conduct yourself [likewise]
 That you may never fail to gain your end. (de Meun, 99.273-77)

De Meun’s endorsement of rape represents the terror and disempowerment that de Pizan faces at the beginning of her story. De Pizan thus shows how suffocating a history controlled by men is she traces the verbal abuse dealt to women from the ancients through the Medieval age.

De Pizan draws more positive influence from Boccaccio’s *De Mulieribus Claris*, a catalogue of famous women in which Boccaccio “includes in his volume both good and bad examples of female notoriety” (Shemek 196). Notable among his examples are Queen Semiramis, Minerva, the Greek prostitute Leaena, and Dido of Carthage, all of which are also found in Christine’s work. Although Boccaccio’s primary focus is historical, he does occasionally praise or disparage—sometimes both. For instance, he states that Busa of Conossa’s renowned generosity is especially praiseworthy because “stinginess is as habitual, or rather innate, to women as is their lack of boldness” (Shemek 201). His clear masculine bias, which Rosalind Brown-Grant calls his “equation of virtue with manliness” (153), prompts de Pizan to create a corrected history in his style.

De Pizan refutes these men’s claims in *Cité* by appropriating their literary tropes to serve pro-feminine purposes. Her self-insert protagonist, Christine, frames the narrative around her despair at the hopelessly androcentric world she lives in. She prays, “Oh God, why wasn’t I born

a male so that my every desire would be to serve you, to do right in all thing, and to be as perfect a creature as man claims to be?" (de Pizan 784). Christine's earnest self-abasement conveys de Pizan's tongue-in-cheek perspective on the matter: it is ridiculous that any woman should consider herself inferior to man in ability or godliness. Christine's prayers are answered when three women—Reason, Rectitude, and Wisdom—appear in her room and guide her through a new human history cleansed of its patriarchal bias. They therefore tell her that they are building a metaphoric City of Ladies, which subverts classically masculine tropes in its content and style.

De Pizan first appropriates the image of a city, often a symbol of masculine progress, civilization, and safety in Western tradition. Unlike the easily-conquered "Castle of Jealousy" in de Meun's poem, Christine's city of ladies outdoes Troy and has "such high walls that the city inside will be safe from assault" (de Pizan 788). The allegory of the city gives *Cité* a magical tone on top of its historical one. It does not merely catalogue ancient figures, but establishes a grand, sweeping image that recalls St. Augustine's *City of God* (Brown-Grant 134). As Alcuin Blamires points out, Christine feminizes "the culture's reverence for foundational impulses" that associates wall-building, manhood, and power (221). In de Pizan's eyes, however, city-building belongs to women as well as men. Her city is of thoughts and words rather than brick and mortar, but the connotation behind a grand female city defies cultural norms.

De Pizan also adopts well-known literary structures to demonstrate that her skill and intelligence matches any man's. Her narrative recalls Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which Lady Philosophy visits and comforts Boethius while he is in prison. The three celestial ladies of *Cité* comfort Christine, who feels trapped by cultural restrictions just as Boethius was trapped in prison. De Pizan organizes her work into three books, paralleling Dante's *Divine Comedy* in both structure and progress. Both works move from the pagan, to the moral, to the

spiritual; both feature a protagonist who begins in despair but, with guidance, ends with far more assurance. Thus, de Pizan imitates literary conventions masterfully in her own work, reminding the reader that such conventions can empower a woman as well as they can a man.

De Pizan likewise inverts biblical imagery in her narrative. Traditional paintings depict the Trinity of God “as three adult men who bear a strong resemblance to one another,” which de Pizan alludes to in her female portraits of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice (Birk 122). The three look “all so alike you could hardly tell them apart” (de Pizan 786). In the presence of their immense poise and supernatural airs, Christine assumes a position similar to that of the Virgin Mary in Luke’s annunciation narrative. Brown-Grant points out that “Mary is frequently depicted alone in a room of her house, an open book containing Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin birth in front of her (Isaiah 7:14), just as Christine is represented reading books in her study in the opening miniature of the *Cité*” (147). Just as Mary expresses surprise and fear at the arrival of Gabriel, Christine is “full of amazement” and “[t]errified” when the three ladies arrive (de Pizan 784).

The inversion of biblical imagery in *Cité* extends to Old Testament iconography as well. Reason explains to Christine that because her role is

to teach both men and women to acknowledge their flaws and weaknesses, you see me holding up a shining mirror like a sceptre in my right hand. You can be sure that whoever looks into this mirror, no matter who they may be, will see themselves as they truly are, such is its great power. (de Pizan 786)

Birk explains that Reason’s self-description strongly resembles the biblical figure of Wisdom (129). The deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom personifies Wisdom much as Christine personifies Reason: “For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an

image of his goodness... she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God” (Wisdom 7:26-27). Wisdom and Reason both act as agents of enlightened, regenerating reflection. De Pizan appeals to the widely-respected authority of the Bible to emphasize that female dignity is not only good, but godly: “God has never criticized the female sex more than the male sex” (de Pizan 807). Whether Mary, Wisdom, or any other female role model of the Bible, such women are more than footnotes God’s kingdom. Woman is an integral and equal steward of God’s image alongside man.

De Pizan also reverses the misogynist trends in historical literature by creating a revised, woman-centered account of history. Because her source material (Boccaccio) had the kind of gaps and flourishes that defined Medieval histories, de Pizan often invented stories. One of the most prominent fictions is the report that the Amazon queen Themiris beheaded the Persian conqueror Cyrus the Great (de Pizan 793), a claim that no historian of Cyrus’ time reports. This, among other inaccuracies and embellishments, prompts Gottlieb to call the account “a potpourri of legend, fiction and history” that is “hyperbolic and naïve” (291). Gottlieb’s judgement is perhaps too hasty; in de Pizan’s eyes, the histories by men were equally fanciful potpourris. *Cité* reflects the biases and fictions in men’s writing back to them, just as Reason’s mirror reflects a man’s appearance and prompts reform. Whether de Pizan’s apocryphal accounts were intentional or not, *Cité* demands a new attitude toward history from an unjust and misogynistic culture.

Christine de Pizan’s revisionist history is not feminist in a formal, modern sense, but there is what Gottlieb calls a “feminist consciousness” in her works: “Here was a woman who, pained and outraged by reading and hearing that women were inferior and evil, refused to suffer in silence. She did not defend herself as an individual, but made common cause with all women” (282). De Pizan does so not merely by *saying* but by *showing*; she takes images used to demean

women—Matheolus' wailing wife, Jean de Meun's rickety fortress of jealousy, the church's depictions of a stern, male Trinity—and upends them with a collection of strong, virtuous women building an eternal city headed by a female trinity. She demonstrates her acumen to an audience of skeptics, proving her point in practice as in word. *La Cité des Dames* is, like Reason's royal mirror, catalyst for reflection and an excellent foundation for future social thought.

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