

INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf famously remarked that the most vital ingredient of literary creativity was neither genius nor inspiration, but quite simply 'a room of one's own'. To her mind, authors could not produce anything of value if they had no place in which to cut themselves off from the cares and duties of their daily existence so as to dedicate themselves to their writing. In Woolf's opinion, it was for this reason that fewer women than men appear in the canon of famous authors, particularly in the period prior to 1700. Being financially dependent on men and bearing almost exclusive responsibility for the household, women had few opportunities to shut themselves away from the rest of the world and to create works of art. Moreover, for Woolf, this lack of a tradition of women writers itself acted as a further brake on the female imagination. Unlike male authors, who always had literary forefathers against whom to measure themselves, prospective female authors were unable to 'think back through their mothers' in order to assert their ideological and aesthetic independence from them.¹

Yet the work of recent feminist scholars suggests that Woolf may have been too pessimistic in her assessment of the obstacles confronting female creativity in the pre-modern period. Thanks to their endeavours, a lost literature by women of previous generations is now starting to be recovered. For the Middle Ages in particular, a period which Woolf dismissed as being one of the least productive for female writers, an authoritative body of evidence now exists which suggests that women *could* frequently overcome the obstacles which, to Woolf, appeared to be insurmountable.²

Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–1430), an Italian by birth who lived most

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of her life in France and wrote exclusively in French, was one such medieval woman who managed to find a 'room of her own'.³ Unique amongst female authors in the Middle Ages, most of whom (such as Hildegard of Bingen) were nuns in established orders, Christine was the first to earn her living exclusively from her pen. She produced many works across a wide range of genres: from interventions in literary debates to courtesy manuals, from lyric poetry to treatises on chivalry, and from biographies of kings to books of pious devotion.⁴ Yet Christine was not only a groundbreaking author in terms of her personal career. She was also the first woman in the Middle Ages to confront head-on the tradition of literary misogyny or anti-feminism that pervaded her culture.⁵

Christine composed a number of texts in defence of women, the most important of which is *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*) (1405).⁶ This text, which was well received in France during Christine's own lifetime and was later translated into both Flemish (in 1475) and English (in 1521), is probably the most familiar of all her works to modern readers. The *City of Ladies* belongs to the genre of the biographical catalogue, a genre established in classical antiquity which celebrated the lives of famous men and women.⁷ Christine's catalogue of illustrious heroines appears within the framework of an allegorical dream-vision in which she herself is the chief protagonist. This vision comes to her one day as she sits in her study reading Matheolus's *Lamentations*, a thirteenth-century tirade against marriage in which the author vilifies women for making men's lives a misery.⁸ The misogynist portrait which he paints of womankind as depraved and malicious creatures so shocks and depresses Christine that she falls into a state of despair at being a member of such a sex.

At this point in Christine's dream-vision, three personified Virtues – Reason, Rectitude and Justice – come to correct the negative view of women that she has absorbed from her study of Matheolus. They inform Christine that she has been chosen by God to write a book which will refute, point by point, the misogynists' accusations against womankind. This book will be like a city, one which is designed to house virtuous ladies and to protect them from anti-feminist attack. The Virtues then go on to provide Christine with examples of past and present heroines

who will form the foundations, walls and towers of this allegorical City of Ladies. In Part I, Reason gives her examples of women, mostly pagans, who were famous for their soldierly courage, artistry or inventiveness; in Part II, Rectitude supplies Christine with stories of pagan, Hebrew and Christian ladies who were renowned for their prophetic gifts, exemplary chastity or devotion to their loved ones and fellow countrymen; in Part III, Justice recounts the lives of female saints who were crowned with glory for their steadfastness in the face of martyrdom or for their unfailing devotion to God. Christine's major source for Parts I and II of the *City of Ladies* is the *De Claris Mulieribus* (*Concerning Famous Women*) (c. 1375), a catalogue of women by the Tuscan author Boccaccio, which she may have read in its French translation, the *Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes*. For Part III of her text, Christine is heavily indebted to the *Miroir historial* (1333), Jean de Vignay's French translation of the historical sections of Vincent of Beauvais's vast encyclopedia, the *Speculum Maius* (begun after 1240). Through her examples of distinguished women, Christine seeks to prove in the *City of Ladies* that the female sex has played a crucial part in human civilization, artistically, politically and spiritually. Her aim is thus two-fold: both to refute the misogynist equation of womankind with sinfulness and to instil a sense of self-worth in her female readers.

In claiming that women can match men in terms of their military prowess, leadership, ingenuity and intelligence, Christine may seem to anticipate some of the key tenets of twentieth-century feminism. However, unlike modern feminists, Christine stopped well short of demanding for her sisters the equality of opportunity or access to education which would have enabled them to realize their potential. Although the heroines of the *City of Ladies* demonstrate that women have the innate capacity to be warriors and teachers, orators and artists, Christine does not recommend that her female contemporaries should actually pursue such careers. Indeed, in the sequel to her catalogue of women, *Le Livre des Trois Vertus* (*The Book of the Three Virtues*, also known as *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*) (1405), Christine's ambitions for her contemporaries seem to be even more modest. In this later text, which is a courtesy book for women offering them moral teachings and pragmatic advice about how they should dress, speak and behave, Christine instructs her female

readers to accept their lot with patience and to submit to male control, be it that of their husbands or their fathers. Far from inciting her contemporaries to resist the limitations placed on them by society, she recommends traditional virtues to them: tolerance and humility to wives, modesty and obedience to virgins, and courage and dignity to widows.

Not surprisingly, this contradiction between the pioneering role which Christine created for herself as a professional writer and the restricted roles as daughters, wives and mothers which she outlined for other women, has led some twentieth-century critics to question whether she really deserves to be thought of as a 'mother to think back through'.⁹ However, it would be anachronistic to apply modern standards to Christine's ideas about the position of women which, inevitably, differ radically from our own. If we are to evaluate the true nature of her achievement as a defender of women in the early fifteenth century, we must put Christine back into her proper historical context and read the *City of Ladies* in the light of the intellectual resources that were available to her at that time.

What then were the dominant medieval ideas about women which Christine had to refute in order to mount a successful defence of her sex?

The Middle Ages inherited a tradition of anti-feminism from two different sources: Judaeo-Christian theology and the medical science of classical antiquity.¹⁰ From the Book of Genesis, medieval theologians took the idea that Eve – rather than Adam – was the one chiefly responsible for Original Sin entering the world. As a result, God had punished her and all other women by making her subject to her husband and inflicting upon her the pains of childbirth. This condemnation of the entire female sex on the basis of Eve's sin was buttressed by the teachings of Saint Paul. According to the apostle, women should keep silent in church and should cover their heads when praying in remembrance of the shame brought upon humankind by Eve's transgression (1 Corinthians 11: 5–13). Misogynist clerics also had at their disposal other key passages of the Bible, such as the descriptions of the harlot in Proverbs 7: 10–12 and of the wicked woman in Ecclesiasticus 25: 23–6, which inveighed against female vices such as disobedience, garrulity, treachery and lasciviousness. Even the undoubtedly virtuous example of the Virgin Mary

was not enough to counter totally this negative view of women. Although, for medieval theologians, Mary's conception of Christ had made possible the salvation of our individual souls in the next world, her virtue still did not remove women's guilt for their part in the Fall. Women's punishment, in the form of subjection to their husbands, thus remained firmly in place in this world.

From Greek scientific thinkers such as Aristotle and Galen, medieval medicine derived a view of the female as a defective male.¹¹ This opinion was based on the theory of the four elements which make up all living things: earth, fire, water and air. Each of these elements has a related quality: coldness, heat, moisture and dryness. Whilst man was thought to be dominated by heat and dryness, woman was supposed to be ruled by coldness and moisture. Since medieval thinkers believed that heat was the primary instrument of nature, they concluded that man was superior to woman, being the warmer of the two sexes. Moreover, this lack of heat in woman meant that her body and mind were unstable. For example, it was feared that she was in danger of going mad if her animal-like womb, which wandered at will due to the coldness of her body, ever strayed up into her head. Menstruation too was taken as a sign that, unlike man, woman was too cold and feeble to regulate internally the amount of toxic humours in her body. Medieval philosophers such as Isidore of Seville, a theologian writing in the seventh century AD, reinforced these scientific views of the differences between the sexes by using pseudo-etymological reasoning. In order to prove that females were a lesser species than males, Isidore claimed that man, *vir* in Latin, was so-called because of his natural affinity with strength, *virtus*, whereas the word for woman, *mulier*, came from the adjective meaning softer or weaker, *mollier*, which was itself derived from the noun for weakness, *mollitie*.¹²

These two traditions bequeathed to the medieval world a view of women as the moral, intellectual and physical inferiors of men. Literary texts in the Middle Ages echoed many of these theological and scientific ideas about the female sex and indeed often drew directly on biblical and classical sources for their anti-feminist inspiration. Matheolus's satirical attack on women and marriage, which Christine cites at the beginning of the *City of Ladies*, was by no means an isolated case. Short

moralizing treatises known as *dits* endlessly rehashed the arguments against womankind, using animal similes to compare women to the most dangerous and venomous of beasts, such as bears and snakes, and showing how the traditional female vices of gossiping and backbiting destroyed good relations between men.¹³ Another popular genre which helped to reinforce misogynist stereotypes was that of mythography, which involved extracting Christian messages from stories of classical mythology. For instance, in the *Ovide Moralisé*, an anonymous fourteenth-century work based on tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when a male figure such as Icarus is represented as being guilty of hubris in flying too close to the sun, this is interpreted allegorically as the human soul's refusal to humble itself before God. However, when a female figure such as Venus is condemned for being guilty of sensuality, this is read not only as an allegorical account of the frailty of the human soul in general but also as literal evidence of the duplicitous and fickle nature of the female sex.

The *fabliaux*, the genre of short comic tales, also represent women differently from men. *Fabliaux* writers tended to criticize male characters as individual members of a particular social group, mocking peasants for their stupidity in letting themselves be duped or condemning priests for their lascivious pursuit of women. Female characters, on the other hand, were invariably treated as representatives of their sex, not as individuals.¹⁴ Thus, if a peasant woman or a bourgeois wife cuckolded her husband or cheated him of his money, the author usually appended a moral in which, even if he had to express a sneaking admiration for the woman's cunning, he would none the less warn all men to be on their guard against such a treacherous and two-faced sex.

Even medieval romance, a genre which put forward a much more elevated view of womankind than that found in the *fabliaux*, was not immune from misogynist influence.¹⁵ Though certain romance authors presented adulterous queens such as Isolde and Guinevere as tragic heroines whose doomed passion for their lovers commands the reader's sympathy, other authors were less lenient in their treatment of women. One of the stock anti-feminist stereotypes circulated in medieval romance was that of the 'Potiphar's wife', a stereotype derived from the Bible. In the Old Testament, this character is a high-born lady who tries to seduce

Joseph, her husband's servant, and then, when unsuccessful, spitefully denounces him to her husband for attempting to rape her. Heldris de Cornuailles, author of the thirteenth-century French romance the *Roman de Silence*, for example, pulls no punches in condemning the 'Potiphar's wife' of his text. Here, it is a queen, Eufeme, who tries to avenge herself on Silence, a young knight in her husband's service, whom she has been unable to seduce. When it is revealed that the innocent Silence is in fact a girl dressed up as a knight, Eufeme's husband, King Ebain, punishes his wife for her treachery and has her put to death whilst the narrator adds his own scathing remarks about the unreliable and corrupt nature of woman.

The most infamous work in terms of its treatment of women was the *Roman de la Rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*), a text which became the supreme literary authority in the medieval anti-feminist canon. This vast allegorical narrative was first begun around 1240 by Guillaume de Lorris but was greatly expanded around 1275 by Jean de Meun who, for this reason, was regarded in the Middle Ages as the more important author of the two. The *Rose* tells of a young man's quest for a lady, symbolized by a rosebud, in which he is aided and abetted by personified figures such as the Friend, who instructs him in the art of seduction, the Old Woman, who guards the rose, and Genius, Nature's chaplain, who encourages the lover to consummate his desire for the lady in the interests of perpetuating the human species. The *Rose* rehearses many familiar commonplaces of classical literary misogyny, including Ovid's ironic advice in his *Art of Love* on how to catch women who, despite appearing chaste, are in fact all too willing to be caught.¹⁶ It also repeats many key arguments from classical misogynous or anti-marriage texts, such as the view expressed by the Greek writer Theophrastus in his *Aureolus* that wives neglect their husbands and have eyes only for their lovers.¹⁷ Because of the great prestige which the *Rose* enjoyed throughout the late-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it was with this text that Christine had to engage most actively and critically throughout her works in defence of women.

Literary misogyny in the medieval period was not confined to secular works but was also a staple ingredient of religious texts. Christian doctrine stated that, on the Day of Judgement, men and women alike would be

treated according to their individual just deserts. However, as in the *fabliaux*, preachers tended to criticize men for failing to live up to the ideals of their particular occupations whereas women were condemned as an entire sex for their garrulity and lechery. Moreover, where both sexes were at fault, as for example in the case of adultery, preachers tended to hold women responsible for attracting men in the first place, rather than apportioning equal blame to both parties.

Even in hagiography, which provided examples of women who *were* moral and virtuous, male and female saints were not treated identically. For both sexes, sanctity was achieved as the soul struggled to liberate itself from the temptations of the flesh. However, for women, but not for men, this process was primarily defined in sexual terms. Whereas men could attain sainthood through a wide variety of roles, for example through their eloquence as preachers or their asceticism as hermits, the typical roles reserved for women were those of virgin-martyr or repentant prostitute.¹⁸ In the former scenario, a beautiful young maiden, such as Saint Margaret, would find herself under attack from a lustful pagan emperor who wanted to seduce her and force her to worship idols. Her only response would be to protect her virginity at all costs, even if it entailed the most horrific forms of physical torture. In the latter scenario, the whore who converted to Christianity, such as Saint Mary the Egyptian, would suffer terrible torments leading to the loss of her beauty as penance for the sensual pleasures she had supposedly enjoyed as a sinner. As in preachers' sermons, hagiographical texts thus tended to represent women as a sex whose corporeality was more problematic than that of men. Unlike their male counterparts, women were deemed to reach the ranks of God's chosen saints only by overcoming the obstacle of their innate sexual attractiveness.

How then could a writer such as Christine begin to take issue with a set of ideas that had so thoroughly permeated every area of medieval thought? The misogynists' position was not entirely unassailable: their chief weakness lay in their heavy reliance on previous sources for their ideas. As was common practice for all writers in the Middle Ages, anti-feminist authors proved their erudition principally by recycling the acknowledged authorities on a topic. It is thus hardly surprising that misogynist opinions gained such currency in medieval culture given that

they were derived from the very weightiest sources, such as Aristotle and the Bible. However, the misogynists were in fact forced to quote *selectively*, citing the bad things that their favourite authorities said about women and leaving aside the good.¹⁹ And good things there certainly were. Whether in scripture or in history, illustrious members of the female sex were not lacking. Far from it: for every sinful Eve or Jezebel, there was an heroic Judith or an Esther; for every lustful Clytemnestra or Jocasta, there was a valiant Penthesilea or an Andromache. In theology, the early Fathers of the Church might have condemned Eve as the instigator of the Fall but they had also argued that, since she was made from Adam's rib and not his foot, God had intended her to be her husband's cherished helpmeet, not his downtrodden slave. Moreover, no less an authority than Saint Augustine himself had argued that men and women were equal in their rationality. Even in scientific thought, women's supposed physical and mental inferiority might disqualify them from public office, but it also meant that they were deemed to be more affectionate than men, particularly towards children.²⁰ By turning the misogynists' method of selective quotation against them, a pro-woman writer could therefore cite exactly the same authorities as they did whilst taking the good said of women and leaving out the bad. In practice, however, very few male authors took up this option, one notable exception being the early thirteenth-century Italian author Albertano of Brescia.²¹ As Christine herself observed, it was only when a woman put pen to paper that a more positive view of the female sex would emerge. What then were the circumstances which led to Christine's being the first woman to do precisely that?

Christine had gone to live in what was to become her adopted country of France in 1368 when her father, Tommaso da Pizzano (whom she referred to as Thomas de Pizan), accepted the position of physician and astrologer at the court of King Charles V. Along with her two brothers, Paolo and Aghinolfo, Christine spent a comfortable childhood in Paris. Unusually for girls of her social rank, most of whom were taught to read French but almost certainly not to write it, she was encouraged by her father to do both, despite opposition from her mother, who preferred her to spend her time on more traditional female pursuits, such as

spinning. Christine read widely in the vernacular and probably acquired some knowledge of Latin as well. In 1380, at the age of fifteen, she was given in marriage to Etienne de Castel, a royal secretary. By her own account, the union was a happy one, producing three children. Yet, within the space of ten years, she was to lose both her father and her husband, two events which forced her to adopt a lifestyle for which her previous privileged existence had scarcely prepared her.

Christine did not become a professional writer immediately on becoming head of her household. Rather, it is thought that, in order to provide for her children, as well as for her elderly mother and a niece who had been placed in her care, she worked for a number of years as a copyist for the various manuscript workshops which flourished in Paris. However, from 1399, Christine began to compose her own literary works. Her aim was to make a living for herself by writing books that would appeal to the tastes of the royal princes at the Valois court, such as Louis, Duke of Orleans, brother of King Charles VI (who had succeeded their father, Charles V, in 1380). These early works, which were mostly lyric poetry, were well received by her aristocratic audience. She built quickly on this initial success and began not only to write more serious texts, such as an account of the role of Fortune in human affairs, *Le Livre de la Mutation de Fortune* (*The Book of the Mutation of Fortune*) (1403), but also to receive commissions from her noble patrons for political and moral works, such as a biography of the late king for his brother Philip, Duke of Burgundy, *Le Livre des Fais et des Bonnes Meurs du Sage Roy Charles V* (*The Book of the Deeds and Good Character of King Charles V the Wise*) (1404).

Yet Christine was also concerned throughout these initial years of her career with matters which struck a personal chord with her: the defence of women against the misogynist claim that the female sex was, in every respect, inferior to the male. *The City of Ladies* undoubtedly formed the cornerstone of Christine's critique of misogyny, but it was not an isolated work in her literary output. As early as the *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* (*The Letter of the God of Love*) (1399), Christine complained of men's behaviour towards women. Using Cupid as her mouthpiece in this text, she accuses knights of failing in their chivalric duty to protect women, claiming that they go around slandering ladies' good names after having tried

unsuccessfully to seduce them. She similarly attacks authors such as Ovid and Jean de Meun for condemning the entire female sex as unfaithful and unstable purely on the basis of a few bad examples. Adopting a rhetorical strategy which she would apply more systematically in the *City of Ladies*, Christine here counters these negative views by citing examples of virtuous women of the past, such as Penelope, Dido and Medea, whom she presents as a credit to their sex. In the *Epistre Othea* (*The Letter of Othea to Hector*) (c.1400), a courtesy book which provides young knights with lessons in good behaviour and in spiritual conduct culled from pagan tales of classical mythology, Christine also gives the lie to misogynist stereotypes. Unlike the author of the *Ovide Moralisé*, who often draws an anti-feminist moral from his tales of female characters, Christine interprets her stories in the *Letter of Othea* exclusively for their general relevance to the human soul, irrespective of the sex of the person portrayed in them.

Christine's main challenge to anti-feminism before she wrote the *City of Ladies* was contained in a series of letters on the subject of Jean de Meun's *Rose* which she exchanged between 1400 and 1402 with other leading intellectual figures of her day: Jean de Montreuil, Provost of Lille; Gontier Col, first secretary and notary to King Charles VI; and his brother Pierre Col, canon of Paris and Tournay. For her opponents, the *Rose* was a work of the highest literary merit, a moral text which skilfully satirized and condemned the pursuit of sensual love. In Christine's opinion, by contrast, the *Rose* was a pernicious text, the work of an immoral and foul-mouthed author whose views of women were vicious and vitriolic in the extreme. She took particular exception to the way in which its male characters, such as Friend and Genius, attack women for their supposed lasciviousness, fickleness and inability to keep secrets whilst counselling the would-be lover to continue pursuing his lady by any means necessary, even by trickery or physical force. Christine also condemned the *Rose* for the way in which it portrays female characters, such as the debauched and unprincipled Old Woman who is supposed to act as the lady's chaperone but instead gives the lover access to her mistress in exchange for a bribe. However, Christine's main criticism of Jean de Meun's text was that it presented an un-Christian view of relations between the sexes, one based on mutual mistrust and antagonism rather than on love and charity. To her mind, the *Rose's* talk of the traps and

snare which men need in order to catch their sexual prey encouraged its male readers to think of women as somehow less than human, as almost bestial. Instead, Christine sought to prove misogynists such as Jean de Meun wrong by arguing that what unites men and women as human beings – their rationality and possession of a soul – is more important than what divides them as sexes.

At the heart of Christine's defence of women, both in her letters on the *Rose* and in the *City of Ladies*, was her profound conviction that it is a *human* – and not a specifically *female* – trait to be prone to sin. However, she also believed that if men and women are alike as sinners, they are equally capable of adopting rational forms of behaviour and of making informed moral choices. It is here, in defending women by replying to the misogynists' assault on female virtue, rather than in demanding the same rights for both sexes, that Christine's brand of feminism in the *City of Ladies* differs most markedly from that of the twentieth century. Instead of campaigning for causes which would have been completely unthinkable in her day, such as universal suffrage or equal opportunities, Christine focused on what she saw as the single, most crucial issue: proving to misogynists and to women themselves that neither virtue nor vice is the prerogative of one sex to the exclusion of the other. Moreover, unlike those modern feminists who exhort women to valorize sexual difference and to celebrate female sexuality,²² Christine was in flight from the body in favour of the spirit. This is because, in her day, it was the misogynist tradition in all its manifestations – scientific, theological and literary – which aligned the female sex with corporeality and sensuality in order to justify their claims about women's social, juridical and psychological inferiority to men.

How then did Christine create the necessary authority for herself in the *City of Ladies* to attack the accepted truths of her age? What examples and arguments could she take from the misogynists' sources in her efforts to beat them at their own game? How were Christine's illustrious heroines meant to inspire her female readers to pursue virtue in their actual daily lives?

The prologue of the *City of Ladies* opens with a secular version of the Annunciation as recounted in Luke 1:38.²³ On being informed by the three Virtues that God has chosen her to build a city in which all virtuous

women would be invited to dwell, Christine accepts her mission with humility. Echoing the Virgin Mary's reply to the angel Gabriel, she states: 'Behold your handmaiden, ready to do your bidding. I will obey your every command, so be it unto me according to your word' (I.7). Christine uses this rather bold comparison between herself and the Virgin Mary as a rhetorical device to help her out of the acute dilemma that she faced both as author and as champion of her sex. Being the first woman to raise her voice against the misogynist tradition, Christine certainly had originality on her side. Yet, in being original, she necessarily lacked the authority which a male writer such as Jean de Meun enjoyed by following in the footsteps of an Ovid or a Theophrastus. In the absence of a prestigious female forerunner whose arguments she could cite as a precedent, Christine turned to the most obvious and unchallengeable source of womanly authority that was available to her: the Virgin Mary. Since Mary's exceptional status as a virgin mother means that she is an impossible model for other women to follow, this choice may seem rather surprising on Christine's part. However, it is Mary's qualities of meekness and mildness which – even anti-feminists had to concede – women *are* capable of imitating, on which Christine draws in her prologue. In allying herself with Mary as a humble creature who has been chosen to perform a difficult task, Christine also alludes to the biblical commonplace by which God elects 'the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty' (I Corinthians 1:27). Women's very meekness thus becomes the most potent weapon in their armoury which they can wield against their misogynist enemies. In the *City of Ladies*, Christine exploits the rhetorical charge of this argument to the full, claiming that if women have been weak in might, they have been strong in right. As Reason declares to Christine:

Out of the goodness and simplicity of their hearts, women have trusted in God and have patiently endured the countless verbal and written assaults that have been unjustly and shamelessly launched upon them. Now, however, it is time for them to be delivered out of the hands of Pharaoh (I.3).

Christine reinforces this paradoxical idea that women are empowered by their own powerlessness by adding a strong legalistic flavour to her

text.²⁴ This particular rhetorical strategy is introduced in the prologue of the *City of Ladies* where Reason cites a proverb which states that 'even the most undeserving case will win if there is no one to testify against it' (I.3). Christine thus contrasts the moral rectitude of womankind with the unscrupulousness of anti-feminists by conjuring up the image of a court-room in which women are being tried *in absentia* as the misogynist plaintiff launches accusations at an empty dock. The *City of Ladies* is Christine's opportunity to put the case for the defence and throughout the text there are innumerable references to 'slander', 'proofs' and 'evidence'. The dialogues between Christine and the three Virtues frequently take the form of a cross-examination in which, ironically, she plays the part of devil's advocate. No sooner does Christine herself put forward the case for the misogynists than her argument is summarily dismissed by Reason, Rectitude or Justice, all of whom deliver their counter-arguments with the oratorical flourishes of a lawyer. For example, Christine quotes the opinion of the Roman orator, Cato, who asserts that 'if woman hadn't been created, man would converse with the gods'. In her reply, Reason points out that it is precisely thanks to a woman, the Virgin Mary, that Christ was born, not simply to redeem the sin of Adam and Eve but also to save humankind from worshipping those pagan gods whom Christians regard as devils. Reason sums up by sarcastically agreeing with Cato that 'it's definitely true to say that men would be conversing with the gods of hell if Mary had not come into the world!' (I.9).

Christine also calls upon a further rhetorical strategy with which to boost her authority. By using the building of a city as the key metaphor of her text, she exploits its multiple connotations.²⁵ Firstly, this image connects Christine's text to Saint Augustine's influential treatise the *City of God*, in which the city represents the Christian faithful both on earth and in heaven. Christine explicitly alludes to this text towards the end of the *City of Ladies* when she declares, '*Gloriosa dicta sunt de te, civitas Dei*' (III.18), and she follows Augustine's lead in using the city as a symbol of the ideal community held together by its common pursuit of virtue. In Christine's case, however, her city is populated by female warriors, good wives and saintly women. Secondly, Christine's use of the symbol of the city underpins one of the central arguments of her text, namely

that women have contributed to the moral and spiritual development of civilization as epitomized by the urban community.²⁶ She thus cites women such as Nicostrata and Isis for their vital role as city-builders or law-givers (I.33 and I.36 respectively). Finally, the image of a walled and turreted city is frequently used in medieval literature as a symbol of defence and, more specifically, of defence of one's chastity. In Jean de Meun's *Rose*, for example, the chastity of the lady is represented as a fortress in which Jealousy, the allegorical figure who personifies her self-restraint, has locked her up in order to protect her virtue. When the lover finally consummates his desire for the lady, he does so by killing Jealousy and storming the fortress itself. The *Rose* thus implies that, despite putting up a fight, women in fact collude with the loss of their own virtue, a suggestion which was one of the mainstays of misogynist thought. Christine explicitly rejects this view in Part II of the *City of Ladies*, where Rectitude refutes the charge that women take pleasure in being raped (II.44–6). Moreover, the whole of her text is as much an impregnable fortress of female virtue as it is a community. As Christine exclaims at the end of Part III:

Most honourable ladies, praise be to God: the construction of our city is finally at an end. All of you who love virtue, glory and a fine reputation can now be lodged in great splendour inside its walls, not just women of the past but also those of the present and the future, for this city has been founded and built to accommodate all deserving women (III.19).

Yet all of Christine's efforts to give her text authority would have come to nothing if she had not been able to derive the bulk of her pro-woman material from well-known and authoritative sources. To be sure, she does sometimes quote from her own experience in the *City of Ladies*, for example when she attacks the misogynist claim that women are prone to gluttony or avarice by stating that she knows plenty of abstemious and generous women whose example disproves these charges (I.10 and II.66 respectively). However, Christine was well aware that the oral testimony of one woman would not be enough to outweigh the written testimony of countless male authors. The only way that she could offer a persuasive defence of her sex was by showing that selective

quotation was a game that two could play. Christine therefore plunders the misogynists' favourite scriptural and classical authorities in order to come up with a mass of examples that support her thesis against theirs. For instance, she counters their theological trump card, Eve, with more positive models of Old Testament women: Judith, the brave and resourceful widow who kills Holofernes, the general who besieged the city of the Jews (II.31); Esther, the valiant queen who saves her people from persecution (II.32); and Susanna, the chaste wife who is ready to be stoned to death rather than submit to the lecherous advances of two corrupt priests (II.37). Moreover, unlike her main source, Boccaccio, whose catalogue barely touches on contemporary women, Christine brings her series of heroines right up to date, citing the queens and princesses of France in tones just as favourable as those she employs in her portraits of Biblical heroines (I.13, II.68).

Christine's selectiveness towards her sources even extends to modifying them, where necessary, in order to highlight the good rather than the bad qualities of her heroines.²⁷ For example, Boccaccio's version of the story of Medea, the Greek princess and sorceress, tells how, when Medea runs away from her father's court with her lover Jason, she kills her younger brother and scatters his dismembered body along the road in order to distract her father from pursuing her. Not surprisingly, in the *City of Ladies*, Christine omits all mention of this brutal act, emphasizing instead how Medea uses her expertise in sorcery to help Jason win his quest for the Golden Fleece and how she shows exemplary fidelity to him, even when he eventually abandons her for another woman (I.32, II.56). Christine also takes liberties with her sources in those cases where she feels the need to clarify or justify an aspect of her heroines' behaviour which might otherwise appear to be blameworthy. For instance, she is at pains to explain why the Babylonian queen Semiramis, whose story is the first 'stone' to be laid in the foundations of the City of Ladies, decided to marry her own son, Ninus, after the death of her husband.²⁸ In an attempt to absolve her heroine for committing an act which would have offended medieval sensibilities, Christine has Reason cite Semiramis's own political rationale:

firstly, she wanted no other crowned lady to share her empire with her, as would have been the case if her son had married another woman; and secondly, in her opinion, no other man than her son was worthy of her (I.15).

However, in her eagerness to exonerate the queen still further, Christine also feels honour-bound to add a rather more speculative explanation. Reason thus also claims that Semiramis was so proud and honourable that 'if she *had* thought she was doing anything wrong or that she might be subject to criticism for her actions, she would have refrained from doing as she did' (I.15).

Not content simply to cite examples from classical and scriptural authorities which counter those of her misogynist opponents, Christine demonstrates that whole arguments from one set of sources can be played off against those from another. For example, she refutes the scientific view that woman is a defective male by citing the theological commonplace that not only was Eve born in a nobler place than Adam, since she was formed in paradise and he outside, but also that the actual matter from which she was made, a rib, was nobler than the earth from which he was created (I.9). In the *City of Ladies*, Christine even manages to make positive capital for women out of some of the anti-feminists' opinions. For instance, she accepts the fact that the female sex is not as physically strong as the male, but she rejects the misogynist deduction that women therefore also have weaker minds. On the contrary, she claims that women are in fact morally *advantaged* by being physically frailer than men on the grounds that what Nature takes away with one hand, she gives on the other. As Reason declares:

if Nature decided not to endow women with a powerful physique, she none the less made up for it by giving them a most virtuous disposition: that of loving God and being fearful of disobeying His commandments (I.14).

In putting the case for women against the misogynists' accusations, Christine also seeks to empower her female readers by persuading them that, as members of the human race rather than of some lesser species, they too have the moral capacity to shun vice and pursue virtue. Indeed, they themselves have a duty to realize this potential and so refute

anti-feminist slanders through their own praiseworthy actions. Addressing her audience directly, Christine exclaims:

My ladies, see how these men assail you on all sides and accuse you of every vice imaginable. Prove them all wrong by showing how principled you are and refute the criticisms they make of you by behaving morally (III.19).

Yet, given the restrictions which their own society placed on them, could Christine's contemporaries actually be expected to imitate her heroines of the pagan or Judaeo-Christian past by becoming teachers or artists, let alone warriors or political leaders?

Christine's answer to this problem is to present her heroines as role models whose moral *qualities*, rather than their literal *deeds*, are offered to her readers for emulation. Instead of being encouraged to harden their bodies for battle like the Amazons of Part I or to suffer the pains of physical torment like the martyrs of Part III, Christine's audience are meant instead to imitate the resourcefulness of the former and the steadfastness of the latter. And it is the women of Part II who provide the readers of the *City of Ladies* with the clue as to how this should be done. These wives, mothers and daughters of past and present themselves perform deeds which 'translate' into their own domestic sphere of influence the qualities shown by warriors and by saints in the public and spiritual domains.

A classic instance of this process of 'translation' at work is provided by those examples of women who used language to benefit humankind in a variety of different domains. Thus, in Part I, Reason celebrates the fact that, in the public sphere, pagan women such as Nicostrata invented the alphabet and facilitated learning and communication between people (I.33), whilst others, such as Isis, devised written laws which replaced barbarism with order (I.36). Then, in Part II, Rectitude transposes women's use of language for the good of human civilization into moral and domestic terms. For example, she commends Antonia for persuading her husband Belisarius to accept the difficult military mission which the king has given him (II.29), praises the Sabine women for begging their husbands and fathers to call off their battle with each other (II.33) and applauds Veturia for imploring her son, Marcius (Coriolanus), to spare

the city of Rome (II.34). In Part III, Justice exults in the deeds of those women whose language performs the spiritual function of rescuing the souls of unbelievers from damnation. Virgin-martyrs such as Saint Martina (III.6) are kept alive by God precisely in order to convert as many people as possible through their preaching. In the case of Saint Christine, the martyr miraculously continues to speak and to proselytize even after having had her tongue cut out (III.10).

The women of Christine's medieval audience would obviously be unable to establish new laws or to convert pagans to Christianity like the heroines of Parts I and III of the *City of Ladies*. Nevertheless, they could still be expected to emulate the women of Part II who 'translated' this moral use of language into virtuous deeds such as offering words of comfort and advice to their loved ones. Christine's concept of role models as moral exemplars therefore has nothing in common with that of modern feminism, with its emphasis on female pioneers striving to break down the bastions of male power and privilege. However, her aim was not to demand reform of the social order but rather to show how the qualities exhibited by extraordinary women in the past could also be demonstrated by women of the present acting in their more ordinary roles of daughter, wife and mother. It was, after all, in this private domain that the women of Christine's day could in fact aspire to playing an influential role in medieval society.

After 1405, when she had finished writing the *City of Ladies* and its sequel, the *Three Virtues*, Christine turned her attention back towards wider political concerns. As the king, Charles VI, became increasingly subject to bouts of madness and the royal princes battled for control of the crown, France began to slide inexorably towards a state of civil war. Christine initially responded to this state of affairs by writing treatises in favour of peace and stability in the body politic. However, she became an increasingly marginalized figure in Parisian political circles and, after 1418, she is thought to have withdrawn altogether from the court and taken refuge at the convent of Poissy outside Paris, where her daughter was a nun.

Yet, towards the very end of her life, Christine took up her pen one last time in defence of women. This time it was to add her weight in

support of Joan of Arc, the maiden-warrior, as leader of the French troops against the English enemy. In the *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc* (*The Poem of Joan of Arc*) (1429), Christine presents the Maid of Orleans as the embodiment of all the virtues that she had extolled in the women of the *City of Ladies*: like the Amazons, Joan is valiant and brave; like the Virgin Mary, she is chaste and pure; and like the heroines of the Old Testament, she is a saviour sent by God to rescue her people in their darkest hour. Fortunately, Christine appears not to have lived to see the Maid suffer her terrible end at the stake two years later. It is the Joan covered in glory from her victory at Orleans and from her part in the coronation of Charles VII at Rheims cathedral who thus provides a most fitting final chapter for Christine's celebration of women.

Christine de Pizan's achievement as a defender of her sex lies not in her anticipation of the strategies which later feminists would employ, but rather in her critical engagement with the dominant ideology of her own day. Though many of her arguments in favour of women, such as her stress on the moral equality of male and female, have been superseded by other ideological and pragmatic concerns, they none the less commanded a great deal of authority in their own time. We need to pay Christine's critique of misogyny the respect it deserves and to see it as a dialogue with the society and culture of the late Middle Ages, rather than judging it by the standards of the late twentieth century. Christine's voice in defence of women is utterly different from our own, but it was in its time a dissenting voice and one which spoke out to its audience with as much urgency and vigour as that of any modern feminist.

NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1928), 76.
2. See, for instance, Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Katharina M. Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); and Carolyn Larrington, *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
3. For standard studies of the life and works of Christine de Pizan, see Enid

McLeod, *The Order of the Rose: The Life and Ideas of Christine de Pizan* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976); and Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984).

4. For an anthology of Christine's works translated into English, see Charity Cannon Willard, ed., *The Writings of Christine de Pizan* (New York: Persea Books, 1994).

5. For an excellent sourcebook of works in the misogynist tradition, see Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

6. For editions of Christine's works, see the bibliography below.

7. See Glenda K. McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogues of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

8. For editions of works by Matheolus and other authors cited in this introduction, see the bibliography below.

9. See, for example, Sheila Delany, "Mothers to think back through": Who are they? The ambiguous case of Christine de Pizan', in her *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 88–103.

10. See Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and for a succinct account of medieval ideas on women, S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 246–52.

11. See Vern L. Bullough, 'Medieval medical and scientific views of women', *Viator* 4 (1973), 485–501; and Claude Thomasset, 'The Nature of Woman' in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *A History of Women: Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press, 1992), 43–69.

12. See Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, 43–5.

13. See *Three Medieval Views of Women: 'La Contenance des Femes', 'Le Bien des Femes', 'Le Blasme des Femes'*, Gloria K. Fiero, Wendy Pfeffer and Mathé Allain, eds. and trans. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

14. Norris J. Lacy, 'Fabliau women', *Romance Notes* 25 (1985), 318–27.

15. See Joan M. Ferrante, *Woman as Image in Medieval Literature: From the Twelfth Century to Dante* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); and Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

16. For extracts from Ovid, see Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, 17–25.

17. For extracts from Theophrastus, see Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, 70–2. See also Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykeked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

18. See Elizabeth Robertson, 'The corporeality of female sanctity in *The Life of Saint Margaret*', in Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, eds., *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 268–87; and *The Lady as Saint: A Collection of French Hagiographic Romances of the Thirteenth Century*, Brigitte Cazelles, trans. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

19. See R. Howard Bloch, 'Medieval misogyny', *Representations* 20 (1987), 1–24.

20. See Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*.

21. Albertano's *Book of Consolation and Advice* (1246) is a debate between the impetuous Melibeus, who wants to avenge himself on his enemies, and his sensible wife, Prudentia, who counsels him not to take any rash action. In the course of their dialogue, Prudentia refutes many of the misogynist arguments which her husband initially uses in order to belittle her advice before eventually winning him over to her point of view. For extracts from this text in English translation, see Blamires, *Woman Defamed*, 237–42.

22. This type of modern feminist theory is most closely associated with French thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. For an introduction to their work, see Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981); and Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985).

23. See V. A. Kolve, 'The Annunciation to Christine: authorial empowerment in the *Book of the City of Ladies*' in Brendan Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23–24 March 1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 171–96.

24. Maureen Cheney Curnow, "'La pioche d'inquisition': legal-judicial content and style in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*' in Earl Jeffrey Richards et al., eds., *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 157–72.

25. Sandra L. Hindman, 'With ink and mortar: Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*: an art essay', *Feminist Studies* 10 (1984), 457–84.

26. See Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Reading Beyond Gender: Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

27. See Patricia A. Phillippy, 'Establishing authority: Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* and Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*', *Romanic Review* 77 (1986), 167–93.

28. Liliane Dulac, 'Un mythe didactique chez Christine de Pizan: Sémiramis ou la veuve héroïque (du *De Claris Mulieribus* à la *Cité des Dames*)', *Mélanges de philologie romane offerts à Charles Camproux* (Montpellier: Centre d'Etudes Occitanes, 1978), 315–43.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

My primary aim in translating Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies* has been to make this fifteenth-century Middle French text as readable as possible for a modern audience. Christine was writing at a time when intellectuals in France were trying to increase the prestige of the vernacular because they felt that it was inferior to Latin. They therefore attempted to replicate the complexities of Latin syntax in French and frequently used linked pairs of synonyms or near-synonyms in the hope that two French words would express all the nuances that they thought a single word in Latin could do. In line with many of her contemporaries, Christine's syntax in the *City of Ladies* is often tortuous and she rarely gives just one word when two or three could be used. These features of writing in this period do not make for easy reading, nor do they make literal translation desirable. In the interests of readability, I have altered Christine's word order considerably and shortened her sentences. Groups of near-synonyms have been respected but I have dealt with pairs of exact synonyms in different ways, depending on grammar and context. Where two verbs are strictly identical in meaning and would be completely redundant in English, I have tended to reduce them down to one: for example, '*ars*' and '*bruslé*' have become simply 'burnt'. Where Christine has two identical nouns, I have often changed one of them into an adjective which reinforces the other noun: for instance, '*congié*' and '*licence*' have been translated as 'express permission'. I have, however, attempted to remain faithful to the legalistic style of her original text and to render as much of its polemical tone as possible.

One important feature of Christine's style in the *City of Ladies* deserves a special mention here as it touches on the key issue of gender. When

she wants to make a particular point about men as opposed to humankind in general, Christine is careful to distinguish between, on the one hand, the specific term '*les hommes*', meaning simply the male sex, and, on the other hand, generic terms such as '*les gens*', which refer to both sexes, or sex-neutral terms such as '*la personne*', which can indicate either sex. Moreover, Christine is equally concerned not to subsume the female pronoun '*elles*' under the male pronoun '*ils*' in those cases where she wants to highlight the moral equality of men and women, as in, for example, the pursuit of virtue. In this respect, if in few others, she is ahead of her time in anticipating many of the arguments that modern feminist linguistics has raised about sexist language. I have therefore endeavoured to respect Christine's usage throughout and have used 'people', 'humankind' and 'humanity' as generic terms, 'person' and 'individual' as sex-neutral terms, and 'men' exclusively to refer to males. Where Christine differentiates between male and female pronouns, I have done the same, and in those cases where a sex-neutral pronoun is appropriate, I have given either 'he or she' or 'they', depending on the context.

I have followed Maureen Cheney Curnow, who edited the *City of Ladies* in 1975, in taking Bibliothèque Nationale, f. fr. 607 as my base manuscript. Christine herself closely supervised the execution of this text and of the three miniatures which illustrate each of its three parts. Ms 607 is a deluxe item, forming part of a collection of Christine's works which she presented after 1405 to one of her noble patrons, John, Duke of Berry. Like Curnow, I have also consulted British Library, Harley 4431 as a control. This manuscript, which contains a later version of the *City of Ladies*, was part of a lavishly illustrated collected volume of her works modelled on that previously given to the duke, which Christine offered to the queen, Isabeau of Bavaria, after 1410.

As a catalogue of famous women, the *City of Ladies* contains literally hundreds of references to places, people and other works. I have therefore provided the reader with additional information and explanations at the end of the text in two different forms: a substantial glossary, which can be consulted at the reader's leisure; and notes on biblical references and aspects of medieval culture, which have been kept to a minimum so as not to interfere unduly with the reader's enjoyment of the work. There

is also a bibliography which gives details of editions and translations of both Christine's primary works and those of her medieval counterparts. This bibliography also offers a selection of secondary studies of the *City of Ladies* as well as suggestions for further reading on its historical and literary background.

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

*The Book of the
City of Ladies*

Translated and with an introduction and notes by

ROSALIND BROWN-GRANT

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