

Ages, ed. R. T. Morewedge (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), 90–120; Charity Cannon Willard, "The Three Virtues of Christine de Pisan," *Boston Public Library Quarterly* 2 (1950): 291–305; and Charity Cannon Willard, "The Manuscript Tradition of the *Livre des Trois Vertus* and Christine de Pizan's Audience," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 433–44.

2. "Si que nulle | ou pou qui s'i embate ne puisse eschapper, et que toutes ou la plus grant partie d'elles soyent fichees en la cage de nostre glorieuse cité, ou le doulz chant apprennent de celles qui desja y sont hebergees comme souveraines et qui sans cesser deschantent alliluya avec la teneur des beneurez angelz. ("So that none | or few who are caught there can escape, and so that all, or the majority of them, may be placed in the cage of our glorious city, where they may learn the sweet song of those who are already sheltered there as sovereign ladies, and who unceasingly sing songs of praise in chorus with the blessed angels," ff. 3v–4r, 1:1.)

3. Raymond Thomassy, *Essai sur les écrits politiques de Christine de Pisan, suivi d'une notice littéraire et de pièces inédites* (Paris: Debécourt, 1838), 186.

4. *Ibid.*, 182–96. This preface is found, for example, in Paris, B.N. fr. 1177, ff. 114r–v.

5. Paris, B.N. fr. 1177, ff. 46v–51v, 1:27. *Oeuvres poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed. Maurice Roy, 3 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1886–96), 3:160–71. Cf. Liliane Dulac, "Christine de Pisan et le malheur des Vrais Amans," in *Mélanges de langue et de littérature offerts à Pierre Le Gentil* (Paris: SEDES, 1973), 223–33; Charity Cannon Willard, "Lovers' Dialogues in Christine de Pizan's Lyric Poetry from the *Cent ballades* to the *Cent ballades d'Amant et de Dame*," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 4 (1981): 167–80; and Charity Cannon Willard, "Christine de Pizan's *Cent ballades d'Amant et de Dame*: Criticism of Courtly Love," in *Court and Poet: Selected Proceedings of the Third Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society* (Liverpool, 1980), ed. Glyn S. Burgess (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1981), 357–64.

6. "When you give alms, for example, do not blow a horn before you in synagogues and streets like hypocrites looking for applause. You can be sure of this much, they are already repaid. In giving alms you are not to let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matthew 6:2–4).

7. Jean-Charles Huchet, *L'Amour discourtois: La "Fin amors" chez les premiers troubadours* (Toulouse: Privat, 1987). Henri Rey-Flaud, *La Névrose Courtoise* (Paris: Navarin, 1983).

8. Christine de Pizan, *Cent ballades d'Amant et de Dame*, ed. Jacqueline Cerquiglini (Paris: Union général d'éditions, 1982).

9. "Me pensay que ceste noble oeuvre multiplieroye par le monde en plusieurs copies quel qu'en fust le coust, seroit presentee en divers lieux a roynes, princeps, et haultes dames | afin que plus fust honnoree et exaucee si que elle en est digne, et que par elles peust estre semmee entre les autres femmes." ("I thought to myself that, whatever the cost, I would circulate this noble work throughout the world in numerous copies to queens, princesses and noble ladies | so that it would receive the honor and praise it deserves, and through them, become known to even more women," ff. 97v–98r.)

Did Christine Have a Sense of Humor?

The Evidence of the *Epistre au dieu*

d'Amours

THELMA FENSTER



A few years ago, at a conference session devoted to the work of Christine de Pizan, someone asked, "Yes, but *did* she have a sense of humor?" The question seems but one more in a number of tentative and circumspect approaches that have sometimes been made to Christine's writings. It has been argued, for example, that she was an unoriginal literary camp follower; she was an overreacting, silly *woman*; she was a prude who failed to understand the *Roman de la Rose* as well as we do; she was wanting in her Marxism; and, she certainly was no feminist. Or, she was a feminist. In that vein, calling Christine a feminist has had its own peculiar consequences, for the fifteenth-century writer has occasionally been confused point-for-point with modern feminists who, as everybody knows, have no sense of humor. And so, the question persists: Did Christine have a sense of humor?¹

Christine was capable of and enjoyed using wordplay, sarcasm, satire, irony, and the like, but of course, none of these rhetorical strategies is necessarily funny; and certainly, deciding whether something is humorous can be a highly individual matter. Then, too, whether a reader grants the existence of some kinds of humor, perhaps especially of ironic humor, can depend upon expectations: a learned male writer—Jean de Meun, for example—could be expected to possess the subtlety necessary to write with both wit and irony, but a woman, without a university education, might not. It is often said, therefore, that Christine is quite in earnest when at the beginning of the *Cité des Dames*, having just read Matheolus's deeply antifeminist *Lamentations*, she deplores the fact that she was born a woman. But Christine Reno has pointed out the staginess, the profound irony, that are surely present in that sigh: "This long opening lamentation is, of course, nothing but a set-up." Reno further describes the entire first chapter of the *Cité* as "a marvelous display of sustained irony."² It is hard to imagine that Christine's regret at having been born female could be otherwise, coming as

it does from a woman who wrote with conviction and eloquence about what she saw as women's natural exemplary qualities.

The use of wit certainly had its advocates among Latin authors admired by Christine's contemporaries. In his *De oratore* Cicero claimed:

Vel quod ipsa hilaritas benevolentiam conciliat ei, per quem excitata est; vel quod admirantur omnes acumen uno saepe in verbo positum maxime respondentis, nonnunquam etiam lacessentis; vel quod frangit adversarium, quod impedit, quod elevat, quod deterret, quod refutat: vel quod ipsum oratorem politum esse hominem significat, quod eruditum, quod urbanum, maximeque quod tristitiam ac severitatem mitigat et relaxat, odiosasque res saepe, quas argumentis dilui non facile est, ioco risuque dissolvit.

(Merriment naturally wins goodwill for its author; and everyone admires acuteness, which is often concentrated in a single word, uttered generally in repelling, though sometimes in delivering an attack; and it shatters or obstructs or makes light of an opponent, or alarms or repulses him; and it shows the orator himself to be a man of finish, accomplishment and taste; and, best of all, it relieves dullness and tones down austerity, and, by a jest or laugh, often dispels distasteful suggestions not easily weakened by reasonings.)³

It is worth noting that of all the oratorical skills, however, Cicero thought that wit was the least susceptible of being acquired, the one most likely to be a gift. Finally, Quintilian in his discussion of humor said: "Ex omnibus argumentorum locis eadem occasio est" ("All forms of argument afford equal opportunity for jests").⁴

It has been said that Christine's wit was perhaps at its keenest in the letters she wrote during the debate over Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, no doubt one of those times when she most needed a sense of humor. Reno comments that "the smug condescension of her adversaries [Jean de Montreuil, provost of Lille, and Gontier and Pierre Col, the latter canon of Notre Dame and of Tournai, and all of them royal secretaries] probably goaded Christine into sharpening the most effective weapon she had available, her wit. And before the quarrel was over, she was to use it to full force."⁵ Of the *littérateurs* who were Christine's opponents, probably Pierre Col wrote with the greatest verve; but the "wit" of all three often turned into facile high-handedness. They themselves could take matters quite seriously, determined as they were to brook no opposition whatever to the writing of that *auctor*, Jean de Meun, whose *auctoritas* they sternly upheld. Remarkably enough, though, their lack of a sense of humor in that regard has not yet earned modern critical condemnation.

Christine's wit had its particular style and purpose. As a skillful inter-

locutor, she knew that humor allowed one to utter truths that might not be said otherwise. Quite to the contrary of the sober, self-righteous portrait of her that has occasionally been painted, it was she who often used humor to mock excessive seriousness when she found it in others—that is, their way of attributing too much importance to themselves or to their own interests. Christine herself commented on her approach in the form of a particular metaphor, that of the puncturing instrument:⁶ responding early in the debate to Gontier Col, who called Christine a "femme passionnée," an "emotional woman," she writes: "Veulles toy reduire a memoire que une petite pointe de ganivet ou cotelet puet percer un grant sac plain et enflé de materielles choses" ("Please remember that the small point of a knife can pierce a bulging, swollen sack") and follows that up with: "et ne sces tu que une petite moustelle assault un grant lyon et a la fois le desconfist?" ("and don't you know that a small fly can attack a great lion and quickly put him to flight?").⁷ When Pierre Col's entry into the debate forced Christine, or perhaps gave her the opportunity, to take up once more arguments she had made in her earlier correspondence, she again had recourse to that image, replying to Col that: "souvent avient que par une petite pointeelette est curé une grant enflure" ("it often turns out that by a small lancet a great boil can be cured").⁸ Inevitably, of course, the small knife and the lancet—perhaps even the fly—conjure images of other pointed objects, such as swords and lances, and writing implements. In fact, the metaphor shows Christine consciously defining the role she saw for herself: someone who, through her writing, could undermine pretense and pomposity—as something of an *eiron* calling the bluff of the arrogant *alazon*.

In a similar vein, Sylvia Huot has argued recently that in Christine's opinion the *Roman de la Rose* erred in trying to present an impenetrable face: Christine said it was like an alchemical treatise, "opaque, deceptive, a self-contained system that leads to no higher knowledge of the self or the world."⁹ (In the *Mutacion de Fortune*, in fact, Christine accuses Jean de Meun of acting like his own character, *Faux Semblant* or "False Seeming.") Citing the *Avison*, where Fraud makes "sure that none of the light from Truth's mirror penetrates the wall" and where, therefore, "Fraud is the principle of opacity," Huot arrives at Christine's criticism of the *Rose* as an "impenetrable and *deshonneste*" work.¹⁰ Thus "Christine situates herself along with Dante as an inspired poet, able to discern fraudulent surface and hidden truth."¹¹ There can be no doubt that falseness was a serious matter to Christine, and so she wrote about it with passion. It is true as well, however, that her desire to expose fraudulence inspired some of her funniest passages, those in which, in one way or another, she lays bare what she sees as flatulent posturing.

The metaphor of the pointed object could be said to describe a debating

technique—the deflating of an opponent's argument by calling attention to its flaws in logic—that Christine employed particularly well in that early literary quarrel. Reno gives two examples: in the first, Christine replies to Pierre Col's defense of Jean de Meun's use of direct language in naming the genitalia, saying: "Mais tu, qui tant te debas et par tant de repliques que plainnement se doivent nonmer par nom et que bien dist la Raison Jehan de Meung, je te prie chierement—tu qui yés son tres especial disciple, comme tu dis—pour quoy ne les nonmes plainnement en ton escripture sans aler entour le pot?" ("But you, who argue in so many ways that they should be named by their name and that Jean de Meun's Reason spoke truly, I ask you sincerely—you who are his special disciple, as you say—why don't you name them openly in your writing without tiptoeing around the matter?")¹² Answering a letter from Jean de Montreuil in which he had accused Christine of daring to overstep the boundaries appropriate to the female sex, she says: "Et ne me soit imputé a follie, arrogance ou presompcion d'oser, moy femme, reprendre et redarguer aucteur tant subtil et son euvre admenuisier de louenge, quant lui, seul homme, osa entreprendre a difamer et blasmer sans excepcion tout un sexe." ("And may foolishness, arrogance, or presumption not be imputed to me, a woman, for reproaching and upbraiding such a learned author, or for stealing some of his praise, when he, one man, dared to undertake the defamation and blame of an entire sex, without a single exception.") As Cicero had already said, acuteness in itself is a quality that gives pleasure.

But less often written about is Christine's success as a wry and amusing *critique des mœurs*, another characteristic way in which she sought to wield her pointed implement. Although there are some quite funny moments in the collection of *Cent ballades*, the lyric poems Christine wrote at the start of her career, it is in the *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* of 1399 (which indeed sometimes repeats material from the lyric poetry) that Christine created for the first time a sustained series of humorous sketches that satirize or otherwise make fun of certain types of behavior. The *Epistre* is a mock royal letter whose author, Cupid, the King of Love, speaks with Christine's voice. Many of the poem's arguments would have been familiar to a medieval audience; in fact, Christine is often able to display her learning by advancing some established views, including theological ones. The work's freshness, therefore, comes not always from the substance of its defensive points but rather from the way in which they are cast: in the fiction of Cupid's letter, for example. Another example lies in the deft humor of Christine's mocking portraits, which provide a demonstration in themselves that humor is to the purpose, a central element of the rhetorical strategy. Cupid/Christine condemns false swains, the slandering of women, and base conduct among nobles, whose comportment ought to be exemplary. Insincere suitors, with

their lovesick poses, on the one hand, and the crowing they do about their alleged successes with the ladies on the other, are Christine's first target (lines 32–66, 105–58); she moves on to the pettiness of learned but misogynous clerical schoolmasters (259–80, 291–308, 323–40), and that leads up to her mockery of Ovid and Jean de Meun (281–88, 321–22, and especially 365–406). Christine's criticism of false suitors emphasizes the staged quality of their courting, so much a matter of public display. The only sincere thing about them is their doggedness. The passage in question is rather lengthy to quote entirely (lines 36–66); this is a portion of it:

Vont disant que griefment les atise
L'amour d'elles, qui leurs cuers tient en serre,
Dont l'un se plaint, a l'autre le cuer serre,
L'autre pleure par semblant et souspire,
Et l'autre faint que trop griefment empire;
Par trop amer tout soit descoulouré
Et presque mort et tout alengouré.

(Lines 38–44)

(Go declaring that a woman's love
Inflames them sorely, keeps their hearts locked up;
The first laments, the second's heart is wrenched,
The next pretends to fill with tears, and sighs;
Another claims to sicken horribly:
Because of love's travail he's grown quite pale,
Now perishing, now very nearly dead.)

Christine satirizes the busy industry of these would-be swains as they scurry about making a spectacle of their amorous endeavors:

D'aler souvent et de venir se peinent,
Par ces moustiers ça et la se pormeinent
En regardant, s'apuyent sur autelz
Par faulx semblans; mains en y a de telz.
Par mi rues leurs chevaulx esperonnent,
Gays et mignos a cliquettes qui sonnent.
Moult font semblant d'en estre embesongnéz,
Muelles, chevaulx n'y sont pas espargnez.
Diligens sont de bailler leurs requestes;
Moult enquierent ou sont nopces et festes,
La vont plusieurs mignos, jolis et cointes.
Si font semblant de sentir de noz pointes
Si qu'a peines les peuvent endurer!

(Lines 47–59)

(Sparing themselves no pain to come and go,
They promenade in church and peer about,
Bending their knees upon the altar steps

In fake devotion: many are like that!
 They spur their horses up and down the streets
 Jaunty and handsome, jingling as they go.
 They make a show of great activity,
 And spare no horse or mule. Then ever so
 Attentively they tender their requests,
 Asking about the weddings and the feasts,
 At which those polished, ardent, gallant swains
 Display how much they feel our arrows' cut,
 So much that they can barely stand the pain!

As a group Christine's false lovers—foppish and long-languishing Romeos, diligently and arduously working at appearing sick with love for their ladies and claiming to perish from the pains of their ardor—are not unworthy of Molière's comic stereotypes.

In another portrait Christine unmasks those knights, arrogant poseurs, who would (and should) present themselves as chivalrous, risk-taking, and brave. In contrast, she shows them seated in warm, beefy comfort, engaging in the sort of facile banter which need only deal in the language of sexual adventure to be thought amusing:

Plusieurs y a qui deussent leur paroles
 En bons contes drecier sans bourderie
 A raconter pris de chevalerie;
 Mais aux grans feus a ces soirs, ou sur couches
 La rigolent l'un l'autre, et par reprouches
 S'entredient: "Je sçay bien de tes fais:
 Tele t'aimé, et tu le jolis fais
 Pour seue amour, mais plusieurs y ont part;
 Tu es receu quant un autre s'en part!

(Lines 122-30)

(Many of them should turn their talk instead
 Toward telling fitting tales without bold lies,
 Stories that show the worth of chivalry.
 But lolling at those toasty evening fires,
 They rib each other, and by means of taunts
 Exchanged, they say: "I know what you're about:
 Your sweetheart's such a one, you play the beau
 To have her love; but many get their part,
 For you are greeted as another parts.)

The homonymic rhyme on *fais* is prelude to the one on *part* (where the expression *avoir part a* means "to have sexual relations with"), as the pair *part/part* brings the conversation to its climax. Christine says that the envious go on to calumniate the lady, although they know no ill of her; and:

Et lors celui qui en est rigollé
 Monstre semblant qu'il en soit adolé;
 Mais moult lui plaist de ce qu'on l'en rigolle,
 Et de son beq mainte parole volle
 Qui blasme vault, combien qu'il s'en excuse;
 En excusant celle nomme et accuse,
 Et fait semblant de celer et couvrir
 Ce qu'il lui plaist a dire et decouvrir.

(Lines 133-40)

(And then the object of their taunting glee
 Pretends that he is pained by what they say;
 And yet, their teasing pleases him quite well.
 Many a guilty word comes flying from
 His chirping throat, although he makes excuse;
 As he's excused, it's she who's named, accused,
 And he pretends to hide and cover up
 The very thing he gladly bares to all.)

To be sure, that bit of moralizing is serious; at the same time, though, it is amusing as a piece of fine psychology joined to the depiction of the lover as a boastful bird, not unlike the foolish bird of lore whose vanity cost him his dinner. It gains in both depth and delivery when we realize that Christine is playing wittily on a proverb, "Qui s'excuse s'accuse" ("He who makes excuses for himself accuses himself"), as she alters it to say that, on the contrary, the devious self-accuser ends up accusing not himself but the lady. Introducing that vignette a few lines earlier, Christine had said that such men were terrible gossips; they talked everywhere about their exploits, whether true or not, and even nobles, the particular object of her lesson, did the same:

Et les nobles font leurs parts et leur cernes
 En ces grans cours de noz seigneurs les ducs,
 Ou cheus le roy, ou ailleurs expandus.
 Et la tiennent de tieulx plais leur escolles!

(Lines 118-21)

(And nobles share the news in huddled groups
 In courts belonging to the dukes, our lords,
 Or yet before the king, or elsewhere spread:
 Of stuff like that their learned discourse comes!)

The sarcasm of the final quip, involving the expression *tenir escolles*, emphasizes the great chasm between the base subject of the nobles' conversations and the high, model tone Christine thinks ought to be theirs.

As prologue to her comments on Ovid, Christine depicts amusingly the travail of a false lover bent on seduction, for whom

... il n'est peine qui ne lui soit legiere
 A endurer ne faissel a porter.
 A autre riens ne se veult deporter
 Fors a pener a elles decevoir,
 Pour y mettre cuer et corps et avoir.
 Et par lonc temps dure la triolaine,
 Souventes fois avient, et celle peine,
 Nonobstant ce que moult souvent ilz faillent
 A leurs esmes ja soit ce qu'ilz travaillent.

(Lines 356-64)

(... all exertion seems quite small
 To him, and every burden light to bear.
 No other recreation does he seek
 Except his striving toward beguiling her,
 Employing all his body, heart, and wealth.
 This torment, with its toil and moil, goes on
 For very long, repeated many times,
 Despite the fact that men may often fail
 At their pursuits, however much they strive.)

Then, in her criticism of Ovid, Christine once more exercises a bit of sarcasm:

Et de ceulx parle Ovide en son traictié
 De l'Art d'Amours, car pour la grant pitié
 Qu'il ot de ceulx compila il un livre
 Ou leur escript et enseigne a delivre
 Comment pourront les femmes decevoir
 Par faintises et leur amour avoir.

(Lines 365-70)

(Now Ovid talks of men like that within
The Art of Love; the pity that he felt
 For them encouraged him to write a book
 In which he teaches them and openly
 Elucidates the way to trick women
 By means of subterfuge, and have their love.)

She goes on to suggest that Ovid's book really ought to be named the *Livre de grant decevance et de faulce apparence*.

Taking on clerkly schoolmasters, Christine deplors their niggling pre-occupation with petty matters. They buzz about at every moment, every which way, creating meaningless drivel equally "en françois" and "en latin"; what they write passes for learning, which they teach to young and impressionable boys. She says:

Si se plaignent les dessusdites dames
 De plusieurs clerks qui leur surmettent blasmes.

Dictiez en font, rimes, proses et vers,
 En diffamant leurs meurs par moz divers.
 Si les baillent en matiere aux premiers,
 A leurs nouveaulx et jeunes escoliers,
 En maniere d'exemple et de doctrine
 Pour retenir en aage tel doctrine.

En vers dient, Adam, David, Sanson,
 Et Salomon, et autres a foison,
 Furent deceu par femme main et tart:
 Et qui sera dont li homs qui s'en gard?
 Li autre dit que moult sont decevables,
 Cautilleuses, faulces et pou valables.

Autres dient que trop sont mençongieres,
 Variables, inconstans et legieres.
 D'autres plusieurs grans vices les accusent
 Et blasment moult, sans qu'en riens les excusent.
 Et ainsi font clerks et soir et matin,
 Puis en françois leurs vers, puis en latin,
 Et se fondent dessus ne sçay quieulx livres,
 Qui plus dient de mençonge q'uns yvres.

(Lines 259-80)

(The ladies mentioned here above complain
 Of many clerks who lay much blame on them,
 Composing tales in rhyme, in prose, in verse,
 In which they scorn their ways with words diverse.
 They give these texts out to their youngest lads,
 To schoolboys who are young and new in class,
 Examples given to indoctrinate
 So they'll retain the doctrine when they're grown.)

Thus, "Adam, David, Samson, Solomon,"
 They say in verse, "a score of other men,
 Were all deceived by women morn and night;
 So who will be the man who can escape?"
 "They're treacherous," another clerk opines,
 "And false and cunning; they're no good at all."

"They're dreadful liars," other men pronounce,
 "They're faithless and fickle, they're low and loose."
 Of many other wrongs they stand accused
 And blamed, in nothing can they be excused.
 And that's what clerks are up to noon and night,
 With verses now in Latin, now in French,
 They base their words on I know not what books.
 Which tell more lies than any drunkard does.)

In addition to the sprightly interest brought to the passage by its rhymes (especially, perhaps, by the contrasting pair *accusent/excusent* and by *matin*!

latin) and by certain syntactic elements (*Puis . . . puis*), there seems surely to be an oblique reference to Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* in the "livres, / Qui plus dient de mençonge q'uns yvres." In the *Rose*, in a disclaimer that Christine would not have failed to notice,¹³ Jean's Poet says that *he* is not responsible for what is said there about women, for he is merely repeating what he found in the ancient books, and they were written by men who were neither foolish nor *drunk*. Here Christine pretends not to know "quieulx livres" the schoolmasters consult as she reasserts that *veritas* resides neither *in vino* nor in the books to which Jean so readily deferred—nor, for that matter, in the *Rose* itself.

In pointing up hypocrisy and falseness, the preceding passages ridicule the exaggerated self-absorption of their masculine targets, implying a certain trusting unselfconsciousness on the part of the women such men deceive or calumniate. Those contrasting traits are most clearly drawn when Christine finally arrives at her explicit mockery of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*. It comes at the midpoint of the *Epistre*, around line 400; indeed, the *Rose* criticism brings the entire series to a crescendo, for in the remainder of the poem Christine enters primarily into a debate mode, taking up one by one the antifeminist arguments of invisible opponents. About Jean de Meun she says:

Et Jehan de Meun ou *Rommant de la Rose*:
 Quel lonc procès! Quel difficile chose!
 Et sciences et cleres et obscures
 Y mist il la, et de grans aventures!
 Et que de gent supploiez et rouvez,
 Et de peines et de baras trouvez
 Pour decevoir sans plus une pucelle—
 S'en est la fin, par fraude et par cautelle!
 A foible lieu fault il dont grant assault?
 Comment peut on de pres faire grant sault?
 Je ne sçay pas ne veoir ne comprendre
 Que grant peine faille a foible lieu prendre,
 N'e art, n'engin, ne grant soubtiveté.

(Lines 389–401)

(And Jean de Meun, his *Romance of the Rose*—
 Oh what a long affair! How difficult!
 The erudition clear and murky both
 That he put there, with those great escapades!
 So many people called upon, implored,
 So many efforts made and ruses found
 To trick a virgin—that, and nothing more!
 And that's the aim of it, through fraud and schemes!
 A great assault for such a feeble place?)

How can one leap so far so near the mark?
 I can't imagine or make sense of it,
 Such force applied against so frail a place,
 Such slyness, cleverness, and subtlety.)

She finishes off that observation by finding, as she liked to do, an error in the logic of those who criticize women. She says that since so much plotting and scheming are necessary to deceive both noblewoman and peasant, then women must not be the easy marks that some men claim they are (402–6). An excellent illustration of Quintilian's recommendation against long-windedness in wit ("Sed acutior est illa atque velocior in urbanitate brevitatis"; "On the other hand brevity in wit gives greater point and speed"¹⁴), Christine's sally against Jean de Meun here avoids any of the more substantive criticism she would offer later during the debate on the *Rose*. At this point she ridicules him for what she sees as his preposterously overdrawn seduction of a virgin: the people, the plots and plans and pains, the posturing—are these not once more the contents of the swollen sack, filled this time with "sciences," "aventures," "gent," "peines," and "baras"? They are set in contrast to the "foible lieu," the simple "pucelle," a figure of (sometimes feigned) weakness who threads her way through Christine's writing, often acting as a foil. Since the "pucelle" is inexperienced, a contrast is implied between Jean de Meun's (acquired) learnedness, which is put to degenerate use, and the (natural) innocence of his female prey. The word *soubtiveté* (line 401), which means a kind of subtlety acquired precisely through learning, is key. Pierre-Yves Badel points out that the adjective *soutil* was applied generally to the ancient authors, whose works required study: "Une oeuvre subtile est difficile. Elle est lourde du poids de la science antique. Elle exige réflexion" ("A subtle work is difficult. It is heavy with the weight of ancient learning. It demands reflection").¹⁵ If we say that the *Roman de la Rose* is subtle, then it is to be treated like a text to be glossed. Badel maintains that if we call the *Rose* subtle, thus elevating it to the level of the classical texts, that would "contradict Christine's judgment," for she "reserves 'subtlety' for the ancient authors and opposes it to the easy writing of vernacular poets."¹⁶ Christine's use of the word *soubtiveté* to describe Jean de Meun's assault is not an exception to Badel's observation; it stands rather as an ironic qualification.

The examples I have cited are linked thematically, rhetorically, and ideologically. Among similarities that might be mentioned is Christine's rebuke of those who put knowledge to perceivedly nefarious ends as well as of those who present hearsay and lies as knowledge: whereas the crowing paramours seated around the fire do no more than pretend to a knowledge they do not in fact have, some of Christine's other *caractères* (schoolmasters, Ovid, Jean

de Meun) sin on both counts by turning their scholarship to bad account and by putting forward fallacious statements. For Christine, the abuse of knowledge in both instances is a reprehensible act, a way of dealing in false appearances, and that is something she associates with certain men, seldom with women. In the *Epistre* she criticizes misogynists for generalizing about all women, and she herself does not generalize, limiting her statements to apply to groups or individuals. Thus she certainly would not claim to be depicting the class of all men. Rather, it could be said that Christine ridicules traits that, when she does find them, she finds in men. It is nevertheless difficult, and perhaps naïve, not to think that passages from her writing like the ones discussed here are meant to return the misogynists' insults in kind. (When she depicts gossiping knights, for example, she is clearly returning to the very accusation of gossip-mongering that for so long had been leveled against women.)¹⁷ They are buttressed by the long list of exemplary qualities that Christine attributes to women in the second half of the *Epistre*, as she studies what she herself calls the *nature de femme* (in her definition, gentleness, meekness, fear of violence, devotion, and the like) and by the equally long list of malignant qualities that she says women do not have (starting wars, setting fires, stealing, cheating people of their inheritance, and the like); she finds the causes of those destructive events in the ambitions of men. It might be said, therefore, that although Christine's re-education of her antifeminist society in the main took the form of writing in defense of women, it was also part of her program to write against certain activities in which she saw men engaged far more often than women.

The *Epistre au dieu d'Amours*, with its moments of wry and perceptive psychology, is thus the first work of modern European literature to provide an explicit woman's-eye view of certain male affairs. There is surely no single, easy explanation for the long absence of Christine de Pizan's writing from modern histories of literature, nor for the lack of modern editions of her work, lacunae that modern criticism is slowly eradicating. Perhaps some who heard the strong and pointed voice of the *Epistre* did not think it funny. They may have hoped to ignore or silence it. Though Christine was subtle, it was not like her to hide the views she most cherished. For her, humor was a diversion through which she could channel her ideas, but she never lost sight of their destination.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this essay was offered as a talk at the Patristics, Medieval, and Renaissance (PMR) Conference at Villanova University, September 24, 1988. All quotations from the *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* have been taken from *Poems*

of Cupid, God of Love: Christine de Pizan's "Epistre au dieu d'Amours" and "Dit de la Rose," Thomas Hoccleve's "Letter of Cupid," with George Sewall's "Proclamation of Cupid," ed. and trans. Thelma S. Fenster and Mary Carpenter Erler (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990). For additional background information, see also Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane, *La Querelle de la Rose: Letters and Documents*, University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, no. 199 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Department of Romance Languages, 1978); Eric Hicks, "De l'histoire littéraire comme cosmogonie: La Querelle du *Roman de la Rose*," *Critique* 32 (1976): 510-19, and "Sous les pavés, le sens: Le Dire et le décorum allégoriques dans le *Roman de la Rose* de Jean de Meun," *Études de Lettres* 2-3 (1987): 113-32; and Charity Cannon Willard, "A New Look at Christine de Pizan's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*," in *Seconda miscellanea di studi e ricerche sul Quattrocento francese*, ed. Jonathan Beck and Gianni Mombello (Chambéry and Turin: Centre d'études franco-italien, 1981), 73-89.

2. Christine Reno, "Christine de Pizan: Feminism and Irony," in *Seconda miscellanea*, ed. Beck and Mombello, 125-33. Passage cited from p. 131; see also p. 127.

3. Cicero, *De oratore*, bk. 3, trans. E. W. Sutton, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 373, 375.

4. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, bk. 6, trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 474-75.

5. Reno, "Christine de Pizan," 129.

6. This arrestingly self-referential metaphor has been noted before in the scholarship. In addition to Christine Reno (*ibid.*, 130-31), Joan Ferrante, in her article "Public Postures and Private Maneuvers: Roles Medieval Women Play," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 213-29, discusses Christine's use of "ganivet ou cotelet" on p. 227.

7. Eric Hicks, ed., *Le Débat sur le "Roman de la Rose"* (Paris: Champion, 1977), 25.

8. *Ibid.*, 149.

9. Sylvia Huot, "Seduction and Sublimation: Christine de Pizan, Jean de Meun, and Dante," *Romance Notes* 25 (1985): 361-73. Citation here is from p. 365.

10. *Ibid.*, 369.

11. *Ibid.*, 368-69.

12. Hicks, *Débat*, 123. Also cited by Reno, "Christine de Pizan," 130.

13. Many medieval readers of the *Roman de la Rose* treated it as a *summa*, an encyclopedic compendium of knowledge which they might dip into here and there to extract nuggets of wisdom. (See as well Sylvia Huot, "Medieval Readers of the *Roman de la Rose*: The Evidence of Marginal Notations," *Romance Philology* 43 [1990]: 400-420.) Christine, on the other hand, seems to have read and grasped the thrust of the entire work. As Professor Willard has suggested informally, Christine may have copied manuscripts for others as a livelihood, and her knowledge of the *Rose* may have come to her through her activity as a scribe. If so, it is most unlikely that she would have overlooked or forgotten the provocative disclaimer uttered by Jean de Meun's Poet.

14. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 463.
15. Pierre-Yves Badel, *Le "Roman de la Rose" au XIV^e siècle: Étude de la réception de l'oeuvre* (Geneva: Droz, 1980), 138.
16. Ibid., 141.
17. I am grateful to Professor Wendy Clein for this observation.

Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*

GLEND A MCLEOD



When Christine de Pizan responded to literary misogyny by structuring the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* as a universal history, she had a more profound moral and artistic purpose than has previously been suggested.¹ Literary misogyny had, after all, consistently relegated women to minor genres (in medieval literature those lacking immediate ethical utility). In rejecting this relegation with her choice of genre, Christine rejected much of the misogynist argument. Her alternative, an important moral and artistic synthesis, also reflects the ethical cast of late medieval literature. Much of this synthesis has passed without comment, but in fact, if read by the standard medieval commentaries, glosses, and *accessus ad auctores*, Christine's defense of women reveals both her indebtedness to scholastic traditions and her shrewd reappropriation of them.

While medieval Europe produced few if any works on poetics per se, scholars such as Judson Allen and Alastair Minnis have recently demonstrated that the commentaries and *accessus ad auctores* often imply a distinct and very different system for reading and writing.² "Literature" as *belles lettres* plays little part in this system; but "literary" texts are studied for their moral if not aesthetic content (itself a category first promulgated by Baumgarten in the eighteenth century). Obviously, texts read under such different assumptions often appear quite different. To one fourteenth-century commentator, for example, Ovid's *Heroides* taught readers how to love their wives more chastely.³ To a recent scholar, the same text offers an intriguing commentary on literary form.⁴ The latter study emphasizes aesthetics in strict formalist terms, that is, without any concern, as in Kant, for the merging of *das Schöne* with *das Gute*. But to the medieval commentator beauty is important only if it leads to virtue.

While most medieval texts on poetics were highly technical treatises on rhetoric, we do have Hermannus Alemannus's translation of Averroës' Arabic version of the *Poetics* (1256), and it does give us some theoretical ap-

REINTERPRETING

Christine de Pizan



EDITED BY EARL JEFFREY RICHARDS

*with Joan Williamson, Nadia Margolis,
and Christine Reno*

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who, like Christine de Pizan, has led with
the *pioche d'inquisition*, "the spade of inquiry"

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