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CHRISTINE de PISAN'S EPISTLE OF THE GOD OF LOVE
AND THE MEDIEVAL IMAGE OF WOMAN.

By Martha S. Waller, Butler University

Who represents the basic nature of woman, Eve, the first sinner, or Mary, the vehicle of redemption? By the later Middle Ages, a long tradition based in ancient, pseudo-classical and patristic writings emphasized the former. Clergymen, especially those in the regular orders, were pledged to an ideal of celibacy, and many of them, along with some laymen, missed few opportunities to vilify wives wholesale, though they could hardly attack wedlock itself since marriage had been instituted by God. But almost any extreme view is likely to provoke its own antithesis, and many other writers--saints, scholars, and laymen--turned from the Eve of the old dispensation to the Virgin Mary of the new covenant. Throughout western Europe, the great new cathedrals consecrated their principal chapels to Our Lady, and in the heart of France the huge and beautiful structures themselves were dedicated to Notre Dame. In literature, Miracles of the Virgin proliferated. In her infinite compassion, she is variously represented as personally supporting the shoulders of a drowning man, rewarding a gymnast for his special devotion, or even standing in for an errant young nun. As Hélène Nahas has put it, one could have said that in the Middle Ages God made Himself into a woman.¹

Parallel to the cult of Mary arose a secular religion of love. Probably more a literary pose than an actual code of behavior, it inverts and parodies medieval Christianity, providing a counter-culture to structured society. Cupid usurps the position of Christ, "St. Venus" that of the Virgin Mary. *Cupiditas* replaces *caritas* as the cardinal virtue, and the devoted knight seeks the mercy not of the tender-hearted Queen of Heaven but of a distant and often unattainable lady.

Thus a four-fold myth of woman appears in literature: the original temptress, with her secular counterpart in the sensual and grasping women of popular tales, and the Virgin Mary, with her distorted image mirrored in the heroines of song and romance.

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Was there to be a champion to offer a new image of woman, human and and secular, yet capable of goodness?

Indeed there was: she was Christine de Pisan (c.1362-c.1431), Italian by birth but fervently French by adoption, self-made woman of letters and doughty if delicate vindicator of her sex. Neither a sinner like Eve nor a virgin like Mary, Christine herself was rather a Martha, a very type of the active life, too virtuous to play the seductress and too much encumbered to follow the way of contemplation until her final years. Left a widow in her early twenties, when the husband whom she adored died of the plague far from home on his king's business, Christine soon found herself further bereft when her father, who had lost his position as court astrologer-physician, died also. Her brothers had departed for Italy to salvage what they could of the family estate amid the trials of civil warfare. Left with three small children and an aged mother to support, the attractive, devout, multi-lingual and talented Christine set out deliberately to make of herself the first professional woman writer of her time. She studied so assiduously, with the encouragement of Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, that she literally forgot to eat. Her mother was sometimes obliged to summon Christine to table repeatedly. That Christine succeeded in her self-imposed commitment is demonstrated by the invitations she received to become the court poet of Henry IV of England and of Carlo Visconti of Milan. With the fervor of a naturalized Frenchwoman, however, she dedicated herself and her pen to her adopted country. In doing so, she wrote not only pieces commissioned by various noble patrons but also works that reveal at least in part her own views.² The most remarkable of these is Christine's vindication of womankind, her *Epistle of the God of Love* (*Epistre au Dieu d'Armours*).³

Wherever she might turn among the vernacular manuscripts of her time, Christine encountered (along with encomia of the Blessed Virgin and courtly romances) tales, verses, and even plays in which Eve and her daughters were held up to scorn. The earliest surviving drama in French, the twelfth-century mystery play known as the *Jeu d'Adam*, provides a lively and antifeminist account of the Fall in which "Diabolus" (a veritable courtly Don Juan) flatters Eve for her fresh and tender beauty while he poisons her against Adam as unworthy of her.

Although the fallen Eve eventually places her trust in God, the image of woman emerges as essentially weak, vain, and gullible. The thirteenth-century verse of Rutebeuf offers a miserable view of contemporary marriage (*Le Mariage Rutebeuf* and *La Complainte Rutebeuf*), utterly at variance with the sweet and gentle relationship of which Christine and her husband partook. In the *fabliaux*, those short and sharp tales of ordinary folk, appear unscrupulous wives like the one who blinds her husband with her underskirt in order to conceal her lover's presence and escape in Jean de Conde's "Le Pilçon" ("The Petticoat"). The evil wife even found her way into beast epic, with Hersent, mate of the wolf Isangrin, who is easily lured into dalliance with the fox and later humiliated by him in the *Roman de Renart*. Almost everywhere, women (with the exception of saints) are derided as both perverse and stupid. A medieval French proverb holds that a woman who talks like a man and a hen who sings like a cock are not good things to keep ("Femme qui parle come home et geline qui chante com coq ne sont bonnes a tenir").⁴ Woman, if not placed on a sacred or courtly pedestal, belongs in the pit.

But by far the best known storehouse of medieval French anti-feminism was the thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose* (*Roman de la Rose*). Its ubiquity is attested by the survival of three hundred manuscripts. In the first part of this allegorical poem (as composed by Guillaume de Lorris), a young man dreams of entering a lovely garden where he beholds the reflection of a perfect rosebud and is overcome with desire to pluck it. Finding his way barred, he commits himself to the God of Love in hopes of securing the Rose. Reason intervenes, relatively briefly, and without success. If Guillaume had lived to complete the poem, he would probably have represented the Lover as achieving his quest without undue delay, but apparently Guillaume died, about 1237.

Others attempted a conclusion, but only one of them, Jean de Meun, succeeded in satisfying readers. And Jean was guilty of literary overkill. This clerkly product of the University of Paris ran the poem on for another eighteen thousand lines, quintupling its length. The reason why his contribution made the romance the

most widely read work of its time and language is that he contrived to include almost everything in the universe: what had been a love story became an encyclopedia. The Lover is urged to forget the Rose. Since the love of this world is delusion, a wise man should concentrate on saving his soul. The Lover, however, is unimpressed, and he chooses to follow Nature, who assures him that love is natural and that he can win his Rose. To his aid come Cupid and Venus, the protectors of the Rose are vanquished, and the Lover enjoys his victory in a conclusion that borders on allegorical pornography. Even in Guillaume's part, the poem is, if courtly, antifeminist in the broadest sense: to reduce the heroine to an object, a rosebud, is to start out by abrogating the humanity of woman. But Jean's continuation libels woman, not only by the Rose's nature but through multiple instances of feminine duplicity and artificiality. The object of love is an intrinsically unworthy object, and it falls when the walls protecting it are set afire by Venus. That any woman is a rose to be plucked, an Eve prone to fall, and that she is hardly worth the taking--this appears to be Jean's message.⁵

That Jean's attitude may actually be one of ironic detachment seems to have escaped Christine de Pisan. Like many of her contemporaries she took the story, including the statements by its many characters, on face value as Jean de Meun's view of woman, and she attacked the *Romance of the Rose* head-on in her *Epistle of the God of Love*.

Since her late husband had served his king in the capacity of royal secretary, Christine was conversant with the forms of address used in court correspondence. With ready wit she adapted these forms to her own purpose. In the *Epistle* (unlike her commissioned pieces) Christine sets forth in her own right a vigorous but tactful rebuttal to attacks on womankind; she uses the form of a royal rescript to the people on the subject of grievances as reported by loyal subjects. The sovereign issuing the letter is Cupid, king by the grace of God of lovers. Evidently Christine's Cupid is less counter-culture god of the religion of love than vassal, like earthly kings, of God himself. Her tone, despite the classical machinery, is devoutly Christian throughout.

As their feudal liege lord, Cupid has received petitions from all sorts of loving women--ladies, gentlewomen, maidens, burghers' wives, and womenfolk in general--who complain that they have been slandered by men. The men who profess to love them have deceived and defamed them wholesale. King Cupid has promised that all his faithful subjects (that is, all good lovers) shall be rewarded by being loved in return. Simple creatures that they are, women have allowed themselves to be beguiled, only to find themselves the object of obloquy, opprobrium, and tavern gossip. Even when the women have insisted upon chastity--perhaps especially then--their would-be seducers have boasted to their fellow men of pretended conquests. All such behavior is wrong, Cupid asserts: men should defend women as they would their mothers. Women, full of pity, sweetness, and sympathy, are by nature man's best friend. If there exist a few women who take advantage of men through pride, avarice, wantonness, or malice, the God of Love asks, are all women to be blamed for the misbehavior of a small minority? When God created the hierarchies of angels, were there not even among them some who proved disloyal to the point of active revolt? Should angels then be called evil? ("Doit on pour tant angelz nommer mauvais?" 196). Why then should all women be held responsible for some few of their sisters? In any case, the Scripture testifies that, although sin itself should be censured, the individual sinner is not to be named and defamed in public ("Car le pecheur on ne doit diffamer, / Ce nous dist Dieux....," 209-210). Clearly the men who denounce unchaste women by name are less than good Christians.

Especially rankling is the censure heaped on womankind by the clerics, because they shape the thinking of the next generation of men and teach that Adam, David, Samson, and Solomon were deceived and corrupted by women (259-269). Christine is quick to point out that these male biblical figures, as well as Eve and her followers, incurred the wrath of God ("Dieu s'en courca et puni leur desroy," 320). But the clerical misogynists continue by night and day, whether in Latin or the vernacular, to produce endless books that tell more lies than a drunkard would utter (278-280).

Christine follows her own precept in censuring the sin without naming the sinner--except when she represents Cupid as singling out two defamers of women, Ovid and Jean de Meun. She was evidently both too charitable and too circumspect to name antifeminists among her contemporaries. Although Christine's Cupid makes an odd literary bedfellow for Chaucer's Wife of Bath, they both insist that the perverted image of woman as Eve results from the all but exclusively masculine authorship of books. (417-419).⁶

Christine traces the masculine attitude to the ancient Roman poet Ovid, author of the *Art of Love* and the *Remedy of Love* (*Ars Amatoria*, especially Book III, and *Remedia Amoris*). With a certain relish, Christine notes that Ovid was banished from Rome ("Ovide, qui puis fu en exil," 388). With him she associates "Jehan de Meun ou Romant de la Rose" (389) and then the unnamed clerics, all of whom, according to Cupid's judgment, have formed their opinions of the female sex on the grounds of their own limited experience. Confining their association with women to those of the worst sort, they then extrapolate to characterize all women as wanton. Furthermore, the kind of man who has sought out loose women in his youth proceeds to defame womanhood as a whole when he has become too old and impotent to enjoy himself otherwise (329-339).

And how, Christine asks through her mouthpiece, can women deceive men in any case? As Ovid himself has shown, women are simple creatures, easily allured by men to a love that is not good but evil, and his book ought to be called not the *Art of Love* but the *Art of Great Deception* ("Art de grant decevance," 377). What need would there be for deception if women, as so many clerics have argued, are such frail creatures that they fall to the first assault on their virtue? No assault is needed to take an unfortified position (397). Again Christine holds to the traditional line; she avoids pursuing further analysis of the trope whereby she might have shown that, if woman is indeed a passive fortress to be taken by guile or by force, she can hardly be simultaneously an active seductress.

Should it, furthermore, be any surprise that some women, like Jean de Meun's Rose, do indeed fall? So did the great citadel of Troy, from which all western Europe claimed its heritage. So, too, do kings and kingdoms, through force, machinations, and engines of

warfare. Is it then any wonder that a simple little female creature ("une chose simplete,/ Une ignorant petite femmellete," 549-550) can be taken? That women are indeed essentially simple and ignorant, naturally subject to male domination, seems to be as much a part of Christine's premises as it is of her nameless clerical adversaries, though she herself was living proof that not all women are ignorant. Her position is completely orthodox: the inferior status of women had been stated in the Book of Genesis, predicated by Aristotle, and confirmed by St. Thomas Aquinas. Christine, in fact, turns this view into an ingenious defense of Eve. Our first mother, she insists, did not beguile Adam. Deception implies intent, and it was Eve herself who had been duped by the Enemy of humankind. In her natural simplicity, Eve merely repeated the words of the serpent out of loyalty to Adam and trust in him. Christine's unsophisticated Eve differs markedly from the coy and ambitious first mother of *Jeu d'Adam*. In any case, Christine continues, God evidently saw Eve's disobedience as comparable to that of Adam--not as unspeakably more heinous--inasmuch as the Redemption extends to women as well as to men (621-623).

God had created woman in His own likeness and endowed her with a measure of knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, He made her of a more noble material than the common clay (the substance of Adam)--more noble indeed than anything created before her--the very rib of man, a substance that had already been shaped and ennobled by the hand of the Creator. So says the Bible, Christine reports triumphantly, and it cannot lie (605). She might have exploited the creation of Eve even further by noting that each level of the Great Chain of Being in its earthly aspect represents a higher form than that created before it.⁷ But Christine is no female supremacist.

No Old Testament woman other than Eve is named in the *Epistle*. Such feminine activists as the Apocryphal Judith, who lured and then slew Holofernes to protect her people, have no place in Christine's catalogue of good women. It is largely classical and altogether traditional.⁸ Evidently Christine's view of woman's nature as sweet, merciful, and congenitally opposed to violence is radically at odds with the celebration of a militant Judith.

Christine's Cupid, however, draws heavily on the Gospels, which in her reading show woman as inherently good, as characterized by

prudence, constancy, charity, zeal, and firmness in the faith. When the crucified Jesus Christ had been given up by all his male disciples, it was His female followers who persevered instead of despairing ("Toute la foy remaint en une femme," 575). In this feminist view, Christine had been anticipated by at least two previous fourteenth-century writers.⁹ Thus her *Epistle*, like most medieval discourses, is not precisely original: it presents, together with her own ideas, a synthesis of various profeminist views expressed by earlier authors. Her originality lies not so much in the individual points that she scores on behalf of women as in the way she presents their case to educe a new image of woman, neither congenitally evil nor necessarily holy.

Her crowning argument, however, turns to the holiest of women, the Virgin Mary. That Christine herself was devoted to Christ's mother is evident from the two series of poems that Christine addressed to her (*Orayson Nostre Dame*, comprised of eighteen short lyrics and *Les XV Joyes Nostre Dame*). Christine needs no authority for Cupid's statement that God the Father found the Virgin Mary worthy to bear His Son. Thus all women should rejoice that one of their number became the very Temple of the Trinity. Jesus Christ in His earthly person is the only human being to surpass her who now sits beside her Son, at the right hand of God the Father in Heaven. To defame womanhood in the aggregate is thus a sin against Christ himself (576-594).

Christine is, however, much too thoughtful a writer to propose the position contrary to that of her opponents; she nowhere asserts that men on the whole are untrustworthy, deceptive, and treacherous. Instead, like the good student of Aristotelian and Scholastic philosophy that she was, Christine posits the contradictory: that some women are good and that so too are some men--even most women and most men among Cupid's followers. She represents Cupid as noting, nevertheless, that if all men were true to the women to whom they have pledged themselves, women might turn out to be worthy of such trust. Obviously Christine is safe enough in this hypothesis. Who would

try to establish the proposition that, in this fallen world, all men are good? Although never explicitly stated, the idea that good human love can lead to love of God is implied in Christine's argument.

For all these reasons, Christine's Cupid concludes, reasonable men should praise, cherish, and love women as their mothers, their sisters, and their friends ("C'est sa mere, c'est sa suer, c'est s'amie," 733; the word *amie* carries amorous connotations). The evil tree bears no good fruit, and men resemble their mothers. Thus it is a crime against love for men to slander women, and any heretic who does so shall be banished, interdicted, and excommunicated from the court of Cupid (721-795).

The conclusion of the *Epistle* follows the formula of royal commands, giving the date as 1399, the place as Cupid's great palace in the air, the witnesses as almost the entire classical pantheon plus a thousand more unnamed, and the signature of Cupid to whom lovers make their pleas ("CUPIDO LE DIEU D'AMOURS/ CUI AMANS FONT LEURS CLAMOURS") followed by an anagram of the author's name ("CREINTIS").

Christine's *Epistle of the God of Love* is thus a clever adaptation of a recognizable literary form--the king's address to his loyal subjects--to imaginative content: an amalgam of borrowed and original profeminist sentiments within the tradition of the religion of love as adjusted to orthodox Christianity. It points toward a new image of woman as neither an Eve nor a Mary, but as capable of goodness in natural human relationships.

To suggest that Christine de Pisan derived her concept of woman's nature from some specific writer or writers would be presumptuous. Evidently the view that feminine nature could be intrinsically good in the secular life of this world was stirring in the winds of fourteenth-century western Europe. Christine drew together the arguments, added some of her own, and pointed them up in her own way.

But in insisting that women were by nature capable of goodness,

Christine de Pisan took on formidable adversaries, making of herself the spokesman of an already emergent feminism and as such the target of misogynists. Though Jean de Meun had been dead for nearly a century (since 1305), his spirit lived on in such men as Jean de Montreuil Provost of Lille, and Gontier Col, both connected with the French court. Already involved in *querelle des femmes*, they were quick to counterattack, insisting that Christine was wrong and Jean de Meun right. But other important men, notably Jean Gerson (Chancellor of the University of Paris and a friend of Christine) and Marshal Boucicault, rallied to her defense. The former actually forbade the reading of the *Romance of the Rose*, and the latter established a new chivalric order dedicated to the defense of women. Christine's views evidently represented an idea whose time had come. Although Christine carried on an acrimonious correspondence with Col and his associates for several years, with copies of the letters being sent to Queen Isabeau of France, Christine emerged as the victor. By the mid-fifteenth century (twenty years after her death), profeminist writings had increased until they outnumbered the formerly dominant anti-feminist.¹⁰

Christine herself, having made her point and having provided for the rearing of her two surviving children, was eventually able to retire to the seclusion of the Dominican Abbey of Poissy, of which she had written with deep feeling during her daughter's sojourn there.¹¹ The busy Martha of 1399 had at last been able to follow the way of Martha's contemplative sister, the other Mary.

NOTES

¹ "...on a pu dire qu'au Moyen Age, Dieu s'était fait femme," *La Femme dans la Littérature Existentielle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), p. 6.

² For details of Christine's life and works, see the biography by her lineal descendant Françoise de Chastel, *Damoiselle Christine de Pizan, Veuve du Maître Etienne de Castel* (Paris: Picard, 1972).

³ See *Oeuvres Poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed Maurice Roy, 3 vols. (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1886-1896), II,

1-27; citations of Christine's poem refer to this edition.

⁴See *Les Grands Auteurs Français du Programme, I: Moyen Age*, ed. André Lagarde and Laurent Michard (Paris: Bordas, 1970), pp. 154-156; John Fox, *The Middle Ages*, in *A Literary History of France*, ed. P.E. Charvet (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974), pp. 192-193; *Fabliaux: Ribald Tales from the Old French*, tr. Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman (New York: Crowell, 1965), pp. 67-70; Fox, pp. 232-236; J. Morawski, *Proverbes Français Antérieurs au XV^e Siècle* (Paris: CFMA, 1925), #737.

⁵See *Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun: Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Felix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1966-1969). For discussion of irony in the *Romance of the Rose*, see Vladimir R. Rossman, *Perspectives of Irony in Medieval French Literature*, pp. 122-157.

6
By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

--Wife of Bath's Prologue, 693-696

See *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 82.

⁷The relative positions of the various forms of life produced on the successive days of creation as they apply to the Great Chain are treated by St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q 72. Oddly enough, Christine undercuts her own argument here by suggesting that there are some who tell of woman's creation as antedating that of man (604-608). Characteristically she is piling up every fragment of thought she has encountered provided that it exalts women.

⁸The medieval catalogues of good women derive ultimately from St. Jerome; see *Against Jovinian*, in *St. Jerome: Letters and Selected Works*, ed. and tr. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1893), pp. 382 ff.

⁹Friar Robert Holkot and Geoffrey Chaucer; "Quamquam enim Christus quosdam, dum hic viveret, viros gratos inveniret, nunquam tamen tam constantem gratitudinem in Petro vel Iohanne vel Iacobo repperit quantum in mulieribus sibi devotis invenit" (for even Christ, while He lived, though he found dear men, never discovered such constant devotion in Peter or John or Jacob as He found in the women devoted to him); see Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), Appendix, p. 321. Perhaps facetiously Chaucer expresses the same thought:

For wel I wot that Crist himselve telleth
That in Israel, as wyd as is the lond,
That so gret feyth in al that he ne fond
As in a woman; and this is no lye.

--*Legend of Good Women*, 1879-1882 (Robinson, p. 509).

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¹⁰See Maurice Roy, ed., *Oeuvres Poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, II iii-ix.

¹¹See *Le Livre du Dit de Poissy*, *Oeuvres Poétiques*, II, 159-222.

Two sonnets by Jean de la Ceppède
Translated by Kenneth Alan Hovey

"Ce grand Soleil"

*This Sun, of which earth's sun is but a spark,
Has circled through four houses of the stars:
Through Virgo, where within nine months his soul
Was compassed with a body just as fair;*

*Through wet Aquarius, when his eye marked out
His grief with tears in many a blameless act;
Through Taurus, when his body was pulled down
And sacrificed upon the shameful tree;*

*On this day he now enters into Leo.
Bemaned with light, he darts a million rays
Of blazing flames on both the hemispheres,*

*And with his roaring voice and with the quake
As he comes from the tomb affrights the beasts
And tells them of the yoke of their redemption.*

"O Père"

*O Father, whose industrious hands of old
Planted this vine, see how in place of fruit,
Which should be its return, the ingrate bears
To crown your son a coronet of thorns.*

*These thorns are the afflictions brought on man
By his revolt in Paradise seduced,
Which Christ has rendered fruitful with his blood
Destroying all man's suffering and guilt.*

*The Father by descending to a bush,
Which, circled round with thorns, burned every bright,
Effected the deliverance of the Jews.*

*The Son descending from his Father's side
Made, in the ever-burning bush of love,
The thorny effort to deliver all.*