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The *Roman de la Rose*, Christine de Pizan, and the *querelle des femmes*

In 1402, Christine de Pizan, one of the first and most illustrious women of letters in the French tradition, was gradually establishing a reputation as a serious writer. Her talents up to that point had been devoted predominantly to the composition of conventional courtly lyric for the enjoyment of her royal and noble patrons, who were already sufficiently impressed by her poetic skills to acquire and exchange manuscripts of her work. On 1 February of that year, Christine put the finishing touches on a small collection of documents which she addressed to Isabeau de Bavière, Queen of France, and Guillaume de Tignonville, Provost of Paris, for their scrutiny and, it was hoped, favourable judgment. This dossier, labelled as the 'Epistles of the Debate over the *Romance of the Rose* between certain persons of note', represented a brief exchange of letters that, the previous year, had grown out of a discussion between Christine and Jean de Montreuil, Provost of Lille, concerning the dubious merits of the famous allegorical poem. Featured prominently was a letter written by Christine which took issue, point by point, with a laudatory treatise on the *Rose* that Jean de Montreuil was circulating among his acquaintances. Jean de Montreuil had himself been introduced recently to the *Rose* by a colleague, Gontier Col, a secretary of the royal chancery, and, in his zeal, wanted to convince reticent colleagues of the work's value. Christine's intention, according to the introductory epistle addressed to the Queen of France, was to 'take a stand, based upon arguments grounded in truth, against certain opinions contrary to pious behavior, and also contrary to the honor and praise of women'. The debate did not end there, however. Over the following nine months, none other than Jean Gerson, the pre-eminent theologian and influential Chancellor of the University of Paris, sided with Christine and contributed his own lengthy document to the debate; Gontier Col's brother, Pierre, reiterated the defence of the *Romance of the Rose* and Christine added still another response which virtually put an end to the exchange. The importance that Christine accorded to the *querelle des femmes*, as contained in this collection of letters, the first

vernacular literary quarrel in the French tradition, can be inferred not only from her ceremonious presentation of it to the Queen, but also from her inclusion of it in manuscripts of her collected works that she compiled as early as the summer of 1402.

Christine de Pizan's cavils with the *Romance of the Rose* were certainly not random, nor were they without significance for the direction and success of her future career. At the turn of the fourteenth century, the *Rose* was quite simply the most admired and most sought-after work composed in French, a fact which is all the more striking because of the work's convoluted genesis. Some 170 years previously, in the second quarter of the thirteenth century, an otherwise undocumented author named Guillaume de Lorris had the brilliant idea of composing the story of a young man's initiation into love in the form of a first-person allegorical dream narrative. In the dream, the young man comes upon an earthly paradise, a garden built by the personified character Pleasure and peopled by such other personifications as Youth, Beauty, and Courtliness, as well as the God of Love himself (portrayed as a winged youth with bow and arrows). In one of the hidden corners of the garden, the narrator finds the rose-bush covered with rosebuds and falls hopelessly in love with one of them after having been struck by the God of Love's arrows. The balance of Guillaume de Lorris's narrative recounts the Narrator/Lover's attempts to get close to the rosebud, which is guarded by a further set of personifications antithetical to the love quest: Jealousy, Evil Tongue, Shame, and Fear. The latter build a formidable castle to protect the rosebud and the pining lover is left outside. The fragmentary narrative ends in mid-sentence, leaving the fictional dream unresolved.

Guillaume de Lorris's account dramatizes the myriad psychological and social elements we now associate with the term 'courtly love': submission of the timid lover to his beloved; distanced longing and prayers for the lady's mercy; the importance of beauty and youth; concern for the lady's reputation; refinement of manners and speech. As an 'art of love', Guillaume de Lorris's *Romance of the Rose* provided a blueprint for all subsequent accounts of male desire and the psychological dimensions of female response as circumscribed within courtly society.

The unfinished work might have drifted into obscurity were it not for the fact that some forty years later, around 1270, a second author, Jean de Meun, undertook a continuation that would bring the work to narrative completion. To Guillaume's initial 4,000 lines of rhyming octosyllabic couplets, Jean added a massive 17,000-line continuation, replete with numerous digressions and encased discourses drawing upon a wide range of classical Latin authors as well as medieval sources: Ovid, Juvenal, Abelard, Alan of Lille, Boethius. In satirically unmasking the solipsistic and disingenuous

tactics of the courtly tradition, Jean de Meun compiled an encyclopaedic array of discourses focusing upon love as a universal human predicament, delving into such topics as procreation, celibacy, friendship, marriage, prostitution, homosexuality, and obscene language. The conclusion of the work recounted an outrageously obscene and blasphemous scene of sexual intercourse, couched beneath flimsy allegorical language that portrayed the narrator as a pilgrim who penetrates an orifice in the castle wall with his staff in order to gain access to the sacred relics protected therein. Distanced adoration of the rose had turned into its metaphorical rape. The combined ribaldry and erudition of Jean's text constituted a provocative and authoritative summation of commonplaces from the student milieu of Paris in the latter half of the thirteenth century. It would also become one of the most notorious compendia of misogynist lore available in the vernacular, branding women with the vices of unfaithfulness, deceptive behaviour, vanity, loquaciousness, and lubricity.

Within scarcely a generation, the composite *Romance of the Rose* had become a bestseller and maintained its position as the most renowned work written in the vernacular over the following two centuries. The work circulated widely beyond the borders of France, exercising considerable influence both in England and in Italy. Whether a result of its licentious images, its cutting satire, or quite simply the access it provided, as a *florilegium* (a gathering of the flowers of literature, an anthology), to a large number of hitherto unavailable texts translated from Latin into the vernacular, the work soon acquired a cult following. Every library, it seems, sought to possess a copy, a fact attested by the nearly three hundred manuscripts that have survived, a figure that dwarfs that for any other medieval work in a European vernacular with the exception of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Patrons for the manuscripts ranged from secular and regular clergy, to wealthy bourgeois, to the highest nobility, who commissioned lavishly illustrated copies on fine quality vellum.

At the time Christine de Pizan launched her debate, the *Rose* was thus a text of towering importance and Jean de Meun was lionized as a great poet and a model of clerkly brilliance. Christine took issue with essentially three interrelated aspects of the work: its verbal obscenity and the indecency of the concluding allegorical description of sexual intercourse; the negative portrayals of women, which tended to treat them as a group and not as individuals, thereby making their 'vices' natural and universal; the work's ambiguity, the absence of a clear authorial voice and intention which would serve as a moral guide to susceptible or ignorant readers. Thus, while a good portion of the polemic involved matters of content that Christine judged morally or socially unacceptable, considerable attention was paid by both sides in the debate to issues of interpretation and readerly competence. According to the

principle behind Christine's argument, which she was perhaps the first to formulate and which remains current in contemporary debates over obscenity and pornography, if a certain readership (be it children, women, or jealous husbands) risks being harmed or urged to violence by such a work, it should be banned. This was in fact what Christine recommended in her first letter: '[The *Rose*] merits being blanketed in fire rather than being crowned with laurel.'¹ Gerson echoed this thought in a sermon of late 1402 critiquing the *Rose*: 'If I possessed the only copy of the *Romance of the Rose*, even if it was worth a thousand *livres*, I would burn it rather than sell it for publication' (*Débat*, p. 182).

Understandable as Christine's disgust and frustration with certain portions of the *Romance of the Rose* might have been, her attack on the book and its author, when viewed against the backdrop of her entire career, appears conflicted. After all, many of her favourite rhetorical strategies – the figurative vocabulary of love, the dream vision as narrative structuring device, the use of allegorical personifications as authority figures – derived from the tradition of which the *Rose* was the pioneering text. Jean de Meun's other celebrated accomplishment was his important translation into French of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, the single work that perhaps most influenced Christine's thought. Furthermore, Jean de Meun was not the only illustrious representative of misogynistic discourse, Ovid and a certain Mathaeolus, presumptive author of the *Lamentations* of a vituperatively woman-hating and long-suffering husband, being other prominent examples. He was, however, as a relatively near contemporary (Jean de Meun died in Paris c. 1305), the prime model for the exclusively male clerical establishment of Christine's time, and so to attack him was to attack a private club of which Christine was manifestly an outsider. It was also the perfect means, through a strategy of provocation requiring some sort of response, by which to establish a dialogue. To understand fully the place of this debate in the context of Christine's career as an author thus requires not solely seeing it as a move to censure a noxious misogynistic discourse or to express moral indignation (which it certainly was!) but also as a strategic step in the construction of a career and the public establishment of an 'other' voice.

Born in Italy, Christine came to France at a very young age when her father, a renowned physician and astrologer named Tommaso da Pizzano, was summoned to the court of Charles V (reigned 1364–80). Married at the age of fifteen, Christine was left a widow with three children by the time she was twenty-five, around 1389–90. Much of what we know about Christine's life at this time comes from autobiographical moments in her writings, which speak about the personal and professional difficulties involved in her need to make a living by her pen in order to support herself and her

family. In a later prose work which intriguingly combines personal reminiscences with political and philosophical commentary, *Christine's Vision* (1405), she provides precious information about her transition from grieving widow to author/publisher and helps fill in some of the gaps in the period leading from her earliest poetic publications to a point at which her prominence had led to important commissions of serious works from the highest nobility. Christine describes an apprenticeship devoted to frothy poetic compositions, which she calls 'pretty things'.² Christine's earliest output, which included hundreds of popular fixed-form poems of various genres (ballads, rondeaux, virelais) dating to the period 1393–1400, the poetic collection entitled *One Hundred Ballads* (c. 1399), *The God of Love's Letter* (1399), and the *Debate of Two Lovers* (1400), predominantly falls into the category of conventional courtly poetry. The 'nobler subject matter' to which *Christine's Vision* refers is undoubtedly related to a dual evolution in her writing that would begin to appear in the following years and that would predominate after 1405: a move towards didactic matter of a political, social, or moral bent; and, formally speaking, the adoption of prose. The first of these new works betokening a seriousness of purpose hitherto absent was the *Letter of Othea* (1400–1), a compendium of exemplary mythological tales in alternating verse and prose aimed at the instruction of young princes, completed precisely at the time Christine sent her first letter to Jean de Montreuil.

Christine's interest in the *Romance of the Rose* was not limited to her participation in the debate with Jean de Montreuil and the brothers Col. In fact, references to the *Rose* or to the debate occur sporadically in her writings through the period 1399–1405. In one of her first longer poems, the 1399 *The God of Love's Letter*, she placed a harangue against the *Rose* in the mouth of the god of Love, Cupid (*Selected Writings*, p. 22). While this critique was undoubtedly not intended to launch a debate, it does contain the kernel of a preoccupation which will last for several years and guide Christine's career, especially when one considers Cupid's later remark that misogynistic attacks turn up so frequently because 'women did not write the books'. One response to such misogynistic content is represented by the epistolary debate. Another response, this one of a social and cultural nature, is Christine's very career as a writer, the ultimate step of which, perhaps, was her composition of a revisionary book celebrating the famous women of legend and history, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405).

Christine's decision to inveigh against Jean de Meun and the *Rose* in the debate of 1401–2 does not therefore reflect a new discovery so much as an amplification of issues with which she had already been grappling for some time. The very context of the debate, a lone woman pitted against several lofty

representatives of the male intelligentsia of the time, formally trained in classical Latin literature and Catholic theology, itself suggests a first instance of the symbolic drama Christine never ceased to rehearse throughout her writings of this period. Here as elsewhere, Christine's use of the diminutive *-ette* to refer to herself (*femmelette*, *seulette*, and so on), her straightforward and consistent deprecation of her own abilities, as in her reference to 'my meagre wit' in the dedicatory letter to Guillaume de Tignonville in the first *Rose* dossier of 1402, turns her weakness to a strategic advantage. These frequent rhetorical moves are not lost on the most clever of her interlocutors in the debate, Pierre Col, who will, contrariwise, call attention to Christine's vigorous arguments (certainly with a modicum of irony) as well as to the public successes Christine had already had by 1402 and admonish her by glossing his remarks with the fable of the fox and the crow:

So I beg you, oh woman of such great intellect, to uphold the honour you have acquired on account of the loftiness of your intelligence and of your carefully articulated language; likewise, I beseech you not to try your hand at hitting the moon with a heavy iron shaft, even though you have received praise for the cannon ball you shot over the towers of Notre Dame. Beware lest you resemble the crow, who, because he was flattered on account of his song, began to sing louder than was his custom and lost his mouthful. (*Débat*, pp. 109–10)

This warning did not fail to evoke a sharp response from Christine, directly in defence of her budding career, but, once again, couched rhetorically in terms of her inferiority:

You give me orders, even accuse me, as though I were presumptuous about myself . . . I consider my situation and my knowledge something of scant importance: all that matters, and here I'm being truthful about it, is that I love study and the solitary life. Moreover, by spending a lot of time in such solitude, it is quite possible that I gathered lowly little flowers [*fleurettes*] from this delicious garden, rather than climbing upon those high trees to pick the tasty, sweet-smelling fruit (not because my appetite and desire to do so are not great, but because the weakness of my understanding does not permit it); and even so, on account of the fragrance of the little flowers, from which I have made slender garlands, those who wanted to have them – people to whom I dare not refuse them – were astounded by my labour, not for any greatness, but because of its very novelty, to which they are unaccustomed. Furthermore, they have not kept quiet about it (even though it was hidden for a long time), but I assure you that this did not occur at my request. (*Débat*, pp. 148–9)

Christine specifies the nature of her work's novelty in her later *Vision*: 'My aforementioned volumes had brought me renown because they had been sent as presents to many princes of foreign lands, not by me, but by others

who considered my work a novelty originating in a woman's sensibility'³ (*Lavision*, p. 166).

As far as Christine's self-effacing depictions of her scrawny literary garlands are concerned, they do not square well with one of the most remarkable of Christine's bookish achievements: her professional commitment to the book as a vehicle for authorial success, which led her to establish a workshop in which she had manuscripts of her works executed for noble patrons. Her constitution of the first *Rose* dossier in a presentation copy to the Queen is undoubtedly similar to her earliest confections of manuscript copies of individual works, most of which have not survived. Starting in 1402, however, and continuing through to 1410, the year Christine compiled what remains her most famous manuscript, the lavishly illustrated BL Harley 4431, she specialized in collected editions of her complete works. All in all, Christine's position as an author, a scribe, a publisher, is totally striking in the literary milieu of the early fifteenth century and it is probably not before the sixteenth century that we find author/publisher figures, male *or* female, as enterprising as she. In this regard, it is important to note that, as an editor, Christine knew how to present matters in her favour. The version of the *Rose* dossier contained in Christine's manuscript collections is highly selective, omitting what were undoubtedly the two most elaborate texts written by the *Rose* defenders, Jean de Montreuil's initial treatise, of which no copy has survived, and Pierre Col's letter, cited above, which was transcribed by chance in a much fuller manuscript collection executed separately from Christine's. To put it in other terms, Christine, as publisher, engineered the shape, and consequent reception, of the debate.

Christine's precocious interest in women and their place in society, for which she is most admired today, is not without its contradictions. The profession to which she was called, which allowed her, essentially, to earn her living after the death of all her male protectors (King Charles V, her father, her husband), was unambiguously gendered masculine. In an early description of her personal and professional transition following the death of her husband, contained in *Fortune's Transformation* (1400–3), Christine elaborates an eerily physical description of her bodily change, at the end of which she concludes: 'I am still a man and I have been for a total of more than thirteen full years, but it would please me much more to be a woman . . . but since Fortune has transformed me so that I shall never again be lodged in a woman's body, I shall remain a man' (*Selected Writings*, pp. 106–7). The transformation from female to male betokens the overwhelming importance that the social symbolism of masculinity held for her. Learning itself was considered to be the province of men, who alone had access to official places of education such as the University, to such an extent that Lady Opinion reveals

to the narrator in *Christine's Vision*, 'some people say that clerics or priests forge those works for you, and that they could not come from a woman's sensibility'. And yet whereas 'becoming a man' was essential to her ability to function in society as a widow, her comments about her own novelty as an author suggest that her success was precisely due to her identification as a woman. It was, in fact, by masquerading as a woman that Christine was able to be taken seriously as a man, that is, as an author. How indeed do we reconcile Christine's constant reminders of her feminine nature – uses of the diminutive, assertions of her inferiority of style and content – with the masculine enterprise in which she knowingly and actively took part? How do we, contrariwise, understand Christine's radically gender-bending view of her own position in the context of her opinions of contemporary femininity, such as we find outlined in the staunchly conservative *Treasure of the City of Ladies* (1405), in which she advocates the most conventional social roles of women as wives and mothers?

Christine's professional and intellectual achievements were extraordinary for her time, as was her awareness of the constructedness of social categories of gender as it applied to her own case. Nonetheless, her social vision of women in general – her staunch advocacy of duty to husband, modesty, and chastity, as well as of the Christian virtues – followed the most conventional attitudes of her time, thus creating interesting shifts across her career. It is in this regard helpful to take a cue from Christine and delineate the three major phases of her professional career. The first phase extends from the death of her husband to the point, 1399, demarcated in *Christine's Vision*, at which she started gravitating towards more serious topics and began to monumentalize her work in manuscript form. The second and most prolific phase, 1399–1405, covers that sketched out in *Christine's Vision*, a period distinguished by her various encounters with the *Romance of the Rose*, her most outspoken pro-woman statements, and her most detailed autobiographical musings – the period for which she is best known today. The third phase follows 1405 to the time of her death (probably around 1430), a period during which she virtually abandoned verse composition, concentrated on political and moral treatises, while relegating autobiographical material to the margins of her writing. This is not to say that there is no overlap. Many of Christine's lyrics from the 1390s are autobiographical in nature, lamenting her solitude and her grief as a widow, and even in the most austere treatises of her later period, Christine makes it clear that hers is a female voice. To be sure, one of her most skilful and moving ballad collections, *One Hundred Ballads of a Lover and a Lady*, dates to this period (1407–10), but Christine makes it clear in the Prologue that she wrote it solely because it had been commissioned by a noble patron: 'my inspiration now lies elsewhere . . . I'd

rather occupy myself with other business, with more learning' (*Selected Writings*, p. 217). *Christine's Vision* narrates a crucial shift in the author's public persona and in her feeling about herself as an intellectual, to the extent that, as the last significant autobiographical moment in Christine's corpus, it functions as a sort of palinode to her previous writings.

In the *Vision*, Christine seems to reconfigure the various notions of gender that were so important in her earlier works. In her opening account of how individuals are conceived, in the baking oven of Chaos, sex is added by Nature, independently of the fusion of spirit and matter:

My spirit approached this place, intent on witnessing this marvel. Then the breath of this great figure [Chaos] pulled my spirit toward him until it fell into the hands of the crowned lady [Nature]. When she had put the mold with all the materials into the oven, she took my spirit and stuck it in, and exactly in the way she usually gave form to human bodies she mixed everything together. And like this she let me bake for a time until a little human body was made for me. But according to the wishes of her who had made the mixture I received the female sex – because of her and not because of the mold.

(*Selected Writings*, p. 177)

Fortune's Transformation, completed only two years earlier, is doubly contradicted in the later work: the Goddess Opinion, philosophical authority of the central portion of the *Vision*, directly criticizes Christine for having attributed to Fortune what is properly her domain, the determination of events in the history of humanity. More important, Philosophy, in the final section, reproaches her for having wanted to change her gender, to which Christine replies: "Why are you asking me this? Don't you know that covetousness has not so overwhelmed me that I might wish to change my very being for that of another, for all Fortune's goods and for all possible riches?" (*Lavision*, pp. 180–1). In personal terms, whereas Christine had bemoaned her husband's death in her earlier writings, the *Vision* lends this event a positive valence, as the means of access to her own solitary life of study surrounded by books. Indeed, as Philosophy will express it, Christine's loss of her husband was a necessary condition for her being able to enter into such a life: 'If your husband had lasted up to the present moment, you would not have been able to indulge yourself in study as you have, for household duties would not have permitted it' (*Lavision*, p. 175).

Whereas the *Vision* celebrates solitude and study as Christine's principal goals, it also advocates a hermeneutic stance that takes a distance from her convictions in the *Rose* debate. In this regard, both the *Vision* and the work immediately preceding it, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, show in distinct ways either that Christine had made peace with the massively popular

allegorical poem, or quite simply that public opposition served no further purpose. The moral certainty expressed in Christine's letters turns into an intellectual relativism in the *Vision*. Lady Opinion, the very principle of intellectual inquiry, or, as Christine puts it, 'the cause which leads people to attain truth through study and understanding', is, we are told, the daughter of Ignorance. All intellectual formulations, including, we are told, both sides in the debate of the *Rose*, are motivated by Opinion. In a similarly revised position, in reference to the misogyny of Jean de Meun and Matheolus, Lady Reason consoles Christine at the beginning of the *Book of the City of Ladies*:

'And as for the poets of whom you speak, don't you know that they have spoken of many things in fables, and that many times they mean the opposite of what their texts seem to say? And one can approach them through the grammatical figure of *antiphrasis*, which means, as you know, that if someone says this is bad, it actually means it is good and vice versa. I therefore advise you to profit from their texts and that you interpret the passages where they speak ill of women that way, no matter what their intention was.'

(*Selected Writings*, p. 122)

The manipulative play between intention, surface meaning, and the reader's interpretation, which Reason recommends here as an antidote to the oppression of misogynistic texts, had been explicitly disallowed by Christine in her letters on the *Rose*.

Christine's championing of woman's cause in society was certainly deeply felt, yet one has the impression from the two major works completed in 1405, the *Book of the City of Ladies* and the *Vision*, that a chapter in her intellectual life had been closed. The *City of Ladies* provides the final response to the concerns expressed early in her career by the God of Love: not only does a woman finally 'write the books', but the architectural construct of the city physically erases the harmful implications of Jean de Meun's fortifications. What the *Vision* adds to this, however, is somewhat of a de-sexualization of Christine's self-image, an assertion that the contemplative life, leading to a communion with God and the Trinity, ultimately rejects material wealth as well as physical particularities. Lest we be tempted to see in Christine's ruminations on her life a precocious example of modern autobiography, an account of one's life for its own sake, she makes it perfectly clear that the major events and reversals of her life are meant to provide exemplary instruction for her readers: following upon the example of Boethius, perhaps her most important intellectual and spiritual predecessor, she ends the *Vision* with Philosophy's instructions, the injunction to seek fulfilment inside rather than in external things.

In this regard, Christine's devotion to books and libraries, as a space of solitude and inner perfecting, becomes itself a metaphor for interior self-satisfaction:

I began to realize that the world is full of dangerous snares and that there is only one single good, and that is the way of truth; I therefore embarked on the path to which nature and the stars inclined me, that is the love of learning. Then I closed my doors, that is my senses, so that they would no longer wander around external things and snapped up your beautiful books . . .

(*Selected Writings*, p. 193)

When Christine closes the door of the study she likewise closes her eyes to the outside world as a space of personal fulfilment. It would be incorrect, however, to say that 1405 marks an end to her engagement with society. It simply marks a different kind of engagement, born of France's political sorrows in its continuing war with England and the debilitating madness of King Charles VI, an engagement characterized by the austerity of a discourse in prose pointed towards military, political, and moral issues. The most noteworthy books of this period include *The Book of the Body Politic* (1407), *The Book of the Deeds of Arms and Chivalry* (1410), *The Book of Peace* (1412), and *The Book of the Prison of Human Life* (1418). After 1418, Christine maintained a silence for eleven years, broken only by her last, remarkable work, which itself assembles the various threads of her artistic life: the *Tale of Joan of Arc* (1429). Joan of Arc, contemporary counterpart of the great ladies Christine had monumentalized in *The City of Ladies*, provides an incomparable synthesis of the themes most dear to Christine: patriotism, virtue, female power, and the miracle of divine intervention. The fact that Christine returned to verse composition for the first time in twenty years in order to tell this tale further accentuates her personal investment in one of the very first literary celebrations of the Maid of Orleans.

NOTES

Note: Except for the passages from *Selected Writings*, all translations are my own.

1. *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Eric Hicks, Bibliothèque du XV^e siècle, vol. 43 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1977), p. 21. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *Débat*.
2. *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 194. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *Selected Writings*.
3. *Lavision-Christine*, ed. Sister Mary Louise Towner (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1932), p. 166. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *Lavision*.