Margolis, Nadia. "A Feminist-Historical Citadel: Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*." *Feminist Moments: Reading Feminist Texts*. Ed. Katherine Smits and Susan Bruce. : Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 11–18. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474237970.ch-002>>.

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A Feminist-Historical Citadel: Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*

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I.7: Christine Tells How She Replied to the Three Ladies

*Once I finished listening to the words spoken by the three ladies [Reason, Rectitude and Justice], which had commanded my complete attention and had totally dispelled the dismay I had been feeling before their arrival, I threw myself fully face down in front of them, not just onto my knees, out of respect for their noble status. Kissing the ground they stood on, I adored them as if they were great goddesses, praising them with these words: 'O noble and worthy ladies, light of the heavens and of the earth, fountains of paradise bringing joy to the blessed, how is it that you have deigned to come down from your lofty seats and shining thrones to visit me, a simple and ignorant scholar, in my dark and gloomy retreat? How could one ever thank you enough for such graciousness? The sweet rain and dew of your words have already sunk into my arid mind, refreshing and replenishing my thoughts which are now ready to take seed and to put forth new shoots which will bear fruit of great virtue and delicious flavor. But what have I done to be chosen to undertake the task of building a new city on earth that you have just described to me? I am no Saint Thomas the Apostle who, by the grace of God, created a fine palace in the heavens for the king of India. Nor does my poor brain have any idea of art or geometry, let alone of the theory and practice of construction. Even if I could learn the rudiments of these things, my weak female body would hardly be strong enough for such an undertaking. Yet, honored ladies, though I'm still daunted by the prospect of this extraordinary task, I know that nothing is impossible for God.'*¹

Although it may seem somewhat anachronistic to use the modern term 'feminist' to describe Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*, that text, the first recorded history of women by a woman author, constitutes one of the first deliberate, systematic

refutations of male assertions of women's inferiority ever written. Its most direct target was medieval misogyny which, despite the growing importance of the Virgin Mary, had been exacerbated in the Middle Ages by the Christian Church's characterization of Eve, but in it, Christine also challenges much earlier misogynies, dating back to ancient pagan Greece and Rome. Her attempt to revolutionize the image of women in western culture begins by deliberately echoing St. Augustine's *City of God* (written 416–22). Both Christine and Augustine (the fifth-century 'Doctor of the Church,' as Christine calls him (8)) attempted to alter an entire system of cultural beliefs: Augustine in defending and glorifying Christianity and Christine in defending women. As Augustine contends that Christianity did not bring about the fall of Rome, Christine counters traditional priestly prejudice by demonstrating that women did not cause the Fall of Man.

Christine's *City of Ladies* is a catalogue of exemplary women. Such catalogues of women had been composed before, by ancient Greek, Roman and earlier medieval authors, but always by men. Designed mainly for women's moral instruction or simply to complement the more serious catalogues of great men, these portraits of virtuous women were restrictively one-dimensional, often condescending or tongue-in-cheek, as in the case of Boccaccio's *Famous Women* (1361–1375), which was a major source for Christine, and which she considerably reworked.² Her *City of Ladies* is divided into three books or parts, according to an ascending moral hierarchy, emphasizing her belief in human progress.³ Each 'brick' in its walls is an exemplum or instructive account of a famous woman's life, usually a positive role model, whether pagan or Christian, ancient or modern, mythic or historical. Part 1, Reason's domain, offers examples of women in political power, learned women and women of commendable judgement. Part 2, ruled by Rectitude, tells of sibyls and prophets, women's filial piety, excellent wives, women saviours of their societies, more learned women, while extolling women's habitual chastity. Those in Part 3, Justice's domain, are female saints and martyrs, to be revered but, unlike the exempla in Parts 1 and 2, not to be directly imitated. In fact, most of the women in all three parts would be impossible fully to emulate, but Christine held that women should be able to adapt their virtues (courage, intelligence and faithfulness) to their own lives. Rare negative cases (2.49) instruct by counter-example, while certain traditionally problematic heroines, like Medea, are favourably recast.

In her closing chapter (3.19), Christine addresses women of all classes, urging them to endure brutal husbands with patience and to cultivate prudence and respectability, since, she believes, a woman's honour and role in maintaining family and thus social stability must take priority over her individual needs.

This ultimately conservative message often disappoints modern feminists. But given the limited legal and social options for women in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Christine's solution to prevailing misogynies is a practical one. Her ideal woman uses meekness as a form of long-term power over her cruel husband, receiving in return a posthumous heavenly reward, if not her husband's on earth. For the first time, we see in her text a history of women designed to encourage their autonomous potential and emotional or professional partnership with men, rather than one designed to keep them confined as had masculine doctrine. That is extraordinary enough, but Christine claims a political role for women as well. In the France of the Hundred Years War, social unrest and outright civil war had threatened the kingdom's survival from within, as gravely as belligerent English claims to French royal succession menaced it from without. Christine contended that women – whether queens, princesses, city-dwellers or servants – could play a special part in restoring peace and harmony, as well as in protecting their homes or fiefdoms when their husbands went off to war, a political objective that persists in the sequel to the *City*, *The Book of the Three Virtues* (1405–1406) where Christine emphasized the importance of women's education.

Christine de Pizan was born in Venice in 1364/1365, the daughter of a highly regarded judicial astrologer, Tommaso da Pizzano, who, in Christine's infancy, had been invited to serve at the court of King Charles V of France. Her marriage at fifteen to Étienne de Castel, a royal notary of good family, seemed to guarantee her a privileged life in her adopted country, but the death of Étienne and Christine's father a decade later left her to fight for years in the law courts for a surprisingly small inheritance, fending off poverty in the meanwhile. Because Tommaso had unconventionally endowed her with an exceptional education, the young widow was able to support her mother, children and a niece by her pen. After first working as what we might call a paralegal clerk, in around 1394–1399, she established herself as a lyric poet, whose plaintive verses, first written for self-consolation, appealed in their fresh, elegant poignancy to royal patrons accustomed only to male poetic voices. She then attempted weightier topics and genres in verse and prose, engaging her knowledge both of Italian humanist ideas – which stressed the role of classical learning in the improvement of society – and of French philosophy, theology, history and literature. Early on, she earned respect from both her male allies and adversaries by contributing to the famous intellectual and moral debate concerning the *Romance of the Rose*, a much-admired, thirteenth-century encyclopaedic allegory by Guillaume de Lorris

and Jean de Meun on the art of love. That debate (1401–1404) began as a discussion among learned clerics on the moral responsibility of an author in regard to public sensibilities, which Christine reshaped into one centred on the *Rose's* flagrant, albeit humorous, defamation of women. Throughout her later works (encompassing moralized allegorical histories, military and political instruction manuals on navigating the treacherous climate of the Hundred Years War with England, and religious texts), Christine managed to reconstruct her authorial persona from that of unfortunate, solitary victim to one of privileged marginal: an involved yet incorruptible sibylline figure for whom writing as a woman became an asset, not a liability. This special, gender-based ‘immunity’ empowered her as she experimented with various poetic and prose genres: first, as a means of consoling herself and earning a living as a widow, and then as a way of improving her society’s image of women’s capabilities and helping to save France from England’s looming dominance. Because as a woman writer, she was not expected to say anything worthy or credible, her keen intelligence and eloquence caught her public off-guard. Her innovative yet learned self-expression earned her authority, attracting powerful male and female patrons alike while often blindsiding potential detractors.

The *City of Ladies*, composed at her career’s highly prolific midpoint, deployed her vast literary and moral-historical learning to rewrite women’s history and refute western misogynistic tradition; it was, unusually, a text addressed not to men, but to women. The passage under scrutiny here, from Part 1, chapter 7 of the *City of Ladies*, validates her as author and authority within the spiritual structure of the City to be built. Her mentors in this project are the heaven-sent allegorical ladies, Reason, Rectitude and Justice, symbolizing humble Christine’s divine election for this task. Her self-introduction is here completed by her reply to the three ladies’ pronouncements just prior to the City’s actual construction. Christine, as narrator-protagonist, has already explained her reasons for writing this book in chapter 1: primarily her deep dismay and disgust at the overwhelming misogyny exhibited by male authors throughout the ages. Here, she refutes not only the mediocre, forgettable Matheolus – also called ‘Matthew the Bigamist’ or Matthew of Boulogne, whose satirical diatribe, the *Lamentations* against women (ca. 1295), claims fame today only for having triggered Christine’s vision – but also influential authorities such as Aristotle. A touch of theodicy also surfaces: if God is good, how could he have created woman as evil? In chapters 2 through 6, after lamenting her fate as a woman to

God, Christine, as narrator-protagonist, falls asleep and experiences awe-inspiring, comforting visions of three crowned ladies, allegorized virtues, sent by God: first Reason (chs. 2–4), then Rectitude (ch. 5) and finally, Justice (ch. 6). Each explains how she will govern corresponding levels of the City, to be built in ascending order. The first, Lady Reason, provides the citadel's avowedly indestructible foundation in refuting the misogynistic tradition and informs Christine of her selection, above all other mortals, as builder of the City (1.4.1). Rectitude offers the symbolic yardstick of moral truth governing the entire structure, which culminates in the high turrets of Justice, the most exalted virtue.

Christine's entire city rises as both an impregnable fortress against further calumny and as a utopia commemorating and fostering women's achievements and virtue. Beyond this striking metaphor of moral architecture, the drama and sanctity of this encounter between divine and mortal recalls Biblical antecedents. First, it echoes the Old Testament (2 Kings 17: 7) in comparing women constrained by misogyny to the Jews enslaved by Pharaoh, thereby likening Christine to Moses (Exod 1; Deut 34). Just as Moses was chosen to lead the Israelites to freedom, so Christine was chosen to lead women to better destinies.⁴ Second, it parallels the language of the Gospels (especially Luke 1: 26–35) in narrating the Visitation and Annunciation of the angel to Mary, a resemblance further underscored by the accompanying miniatures illustrating this scene in manuscripts of the City.⁵ This visitation scene is also portentous for Christine's battle with Jean de Meun, as part of her rebuttal of some of the *Romance of the Rose's* most influential, but saliently misogynous episodes. As Maureen Quilligan argues, she rewrites the dialogue between Reason and the Lover, the naïve male narrator-protagonist of the *Rose*.⁶ Jean de Meun's Reason is an intelligent female allegorical mentor-figure for his supposed 'art of love', but Christine found her perversely portrayed: a negative example of a learned woman right down to her vulgar language. Instead, Christine, as pupil in the *City* (ch. 6), engages with Reason in an edifying, ethically progressive discussion about the sad state and possible reform of men's attitudes towards women.

This is but one example of how Christine tried to reform women's image in literature and the sciences, whether by overt teaching or by example, throughout her forty-three works: others appear as our passage continues. Chapter 7 continues the visitation scene. Now Christine, the chosen 'builder', though elated, attempts to answer the ladies without alienating them or the reader by excessive hubris – a risk implicit in her self-depiction as divinely

chosen. Humility is a frequent concern among medieval visionary authors, and Christine dramatizes hers by throwing herself ‘fully face down’, by ‘kissing the ground’ near their feet and by spontaneously uttering emotional, self-deprecating words without diminishing her credibility. Her reply begins by interweaving three symbols – light, fountains and loftiness – to represent how her previous state, suffering in darkness, aridity and lowliness in various forms, has now been uplifted by these three ladies whom she now compares to goddesses. She exploits this symbolism, and further emphasizes her humility, by evoking multidimensional oppositions, enhanced by the purely emotional contrast between the ‘joy’ these ladies’ teachings instil within her and her ‘gloomy’ state before encountering them. Thus, she moves from the celestial level of each – light of heaven, fountains of Paradise and shining thrones – down to their earthly impact by means of botanical imagery: their teachings nourish and refresh her mind, enabling it to bear delicious fruit: presumably this book, which she hopes will entice her readers to think and act on a higher level.

Her imagery quickly shifts from the horticultural back to the architectural, however, when she asks why the ladies chose her. She activates another opposition: that of male versus female capability, enabling her to play with stereotypes so as to demolish them. In questioning her worthiness, she self-identifies with Dante, whose writings she was the first author to introduce into French literature, by invoking an analogous precedent. Just as Dante answered Virgil’s invitation to journey with him to the Underworld in *Inferno* with ‘I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul’ (2: 31–32), Christine declines comparison with the apostle St. Thomas who, unlike Christine, possessed architectural training as well as God’s grace, enabling him to build a city for King Gundafor of India.⁷ Quilligan intriguingly connects Christine’s shift from a self-doubting Dante to the famously doubting apostle Thomas.⁸ Dante’s self-doubt arises from his humility before two celebrated precursors – one, Virgil’s epic founding hero of Rome, and the other, ‘God’s Chosen Vessel’ – both voyaging beyond mortal realms through divine election. But Christine’s self-doubt is even more understandable since, as she states, even were she a ‘quick study’ in the principles of architecture, her physical weakness due to her gender prohibits such an undertaking. She refuses, however, to deny her intellectual ability to master architecture and building, except in a passing mention of her ‘poor brain’ for mathematics (similar disavowals would be echoed by many women writers, such as, for example, Anne Bradstreet in the following centuries.

See Chapter 2 of this volume). Yet, that the ladies chose her because of her uncompromising intelligence is reaffirmed when, in the following chapter, they command her to 'take the spade of your intelligence and dig deep' to begin work on the citadel (ch. 8, p. 16). They evidently plan to compensate for her physical weakness by imparting their God-given grace, for which, as our passage concludes, 'nothing is impossible.' Once Christine has cleared the Field of Letters of the old misogynistic ideas with her spade, her City can grow in their place (City, ch. 8, p. 16): now rid of misogynist 'dirt', it is ready for insertion within the cultural canon as 'corrective answer' to the negative male tradition.⁹

Christine's 'correction' remains restrained and prudent: she did not so much advocate female supremacy as equality, a complementary co-working with men for a better society. And to render her teachings more applicable to women of all classes, Christine followed up the *City* with the aforementioned *Book of the Three Virtues* (1405–1406), significantly retitled by her first printer, Vérard (1497), as *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. For this is a text which presents a woman's honour and virtue as her 'treasury' in real-world dealings, a figure that would remain influential into nineteenth-century feminist thinking. Both works were widely translated in their own time and reproduced in many manuscript copies before print versions appeared.¹⁰ Such success would have pleased Christine, since perhaps the *City's* greatest contribution is its unprecedentedly accessible content, its new canon, to women of all social ranks, not just the literate aristocrats: a way of improving each class of woman by example.¹¹ For the less-literate classes unable to read her words, Christine raised aristocratic consciousness of their plight and yet also their potential for redemption, an inspiration to upper-class women especially to look after the less fortunate. Her feminism never sought to deny or usurp male agency, but rather to alert women to their own powers of agency, superior or at least equal to men's as a sort of partnership within all ranks of society and in keeping with God's will. Yet, she never expects them to be solitary, studious 'politicos' like her, probably because she wishes them greater happiness.¹²

Towards the end of her life, in monastic retreat from the violence all around her, Christine, elated at Joan of Arc's exploits, became the first French author to praise them during the heroine's lifetime in her last known work, the *Song of Joan of Arc* (1429). Written to offset English propaganda (which ascribed Joan's Orleans victory to witchcraft), the poem affirms Joan as appointed by God, a parallel to Christine's own divine 'appointment' by the Three Virtues

to build the City of Ladies. This fervently patriotic poem asserts that Joan not only validated France's right to her own king, but also acted as a *City of Ladies* heroine come to life. In creating that figure, Christine extended her tireless exaltation of women and cemented her transformation of them from the damnable temptresses and mindless servants of men that she had inherited from the male authors who preceded and surrounded her, to potentially valiant saviours favoured by God on all levels. This transformation was her proto-feminist achievement.