

A Narration of Female Experience: Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* Christine de Pizan'ın *The Book of the City of Ladies* Adlı Eserinde Kadın Deneyiminin Anlatımı

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Öz- Christine de Pizan (1363/1364?-1430), sadece Orta Çağ edebiyatında değil aynı zamanda kadınların yazım geleneğinde önemli bir iz bırakan, ilk profesyonel kadın yazar olarak bilinir. Kişisel ve kolektif kadın deneyimine dayanarak, Orta Çağ döneminin ataerkil toplumunda kadınların yaşamının farklı yönlerini ele aldığı yüzlerce edebi eserin yazarı olmuştur. Eserleri, kadınları sınırlayan ve onları alçaltıcı durumlara hapseden ve kadın düşmanlığı sergileyen yapılara karşı mücadele ortaya koyar. Bu çalışma, pagan zamanlardan Hıristiyan tarihine farklı kadın hikayeleri ve başarılarını içeren de Pizan'ın önemli eserlerinden biri olan *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-1405) adlı çalışmasını irdelemeyi amaçlar. Bu Orta Çağ anlatı eserinde de, de Pizan alegorik karakterleri, kadın düşmanlığı söylemi ve uygulamaları hakkında bir tartışma başlatmak için stratejik biçimde kullanır. Eser kadınların deneyiminin panoramasını açığa çıkarırken, ataerkil güce ve hakimiyete meydan okuyan bir anlatı sunar. Bu çalışma de Pizan'ın kadın deneyimine dayanan anlatısında kadınların varlığını nasıl güçlendirdiğini ve sonraki kuşak kadın yazarlardan önce feminist yazımda öncü olduğunu gösterir.

Anahtar Kelimeler- *Christine de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies, Orta Çağ Toplumları, Kadın Düşmanlığı, Kadınları Güçlendirme.*

Abstract – Christine de Pizan (1363/1364?-1430) is recognised as the first professional female writer who left a significant mark not only on medieval literature but also women's writing tradition. Depending on personal and collective female experience, she becomes the writer of over a hundred literary pieces in which she deals with different aspects of women's lives in the patriarchal society of the medieval period. Her *oeuvre* displays a struggle against the misogynistic confines that limit and imprison women into degraded positions. This study aims to explore one of her significant works, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-1405), in which de Pizan gives an account of various women's stories and their achievements from pagan times to Christian history. In this narration of the medieval dream vision genre, de Pizan strategically uses allegorical characters to initiate a discussion on misogynistic discourse and practices. While the work unveils a panorama of the female experience, it offers a narrative that challenges patriarchal power and dominance. This paper illustrates how de Pizan empowers women's existence in her narration based on female experience and predates feminist writing before later generations of women writers.

Keywords- *Christine de Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies, Medieval Society, Misogyny, Female Empowerment.*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to explore Christine de Pizan's (1363/1364?-1430) extraordinary position as the first professional writer in the medieval period and to analyse one of her notable works, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-1405), in which she presents a myriad of female experiences from pagan times to Christian history by creating a counter-narrative against misogyny. Christine de Pizan made her appearance as an eminent author in the medieval period, and she owned her unique place as the first professional woman writer. Producing a hundred literary pieces, she was rewarded and protected by the patronage she received from the royal and noble figures, including the monarch of her time. Although women were not given opportunities to stand on their feet during the Middle Ages, de Pizan proved herself to be an extraordinary woman. At a time when women were excluded from the literary sphere, she initially attained a good education thanks to her father. In a similar fashion to other women, she experienced wifehood and motherhood, but her life was shattered after losing her father and her husband. It is true that she had to survive as a widow in society while she was suffering from financial troubles. However, her path of widowhood was quite different considering that she decided to become a professional writer to earn money. When she began producing her first poems, she thoroughly leaned

on her own experiences so that she dealt with the themes of widowhood, pain, loss, love, and suffering in her works. In time, however, she extended the scope of her works by assuming a political tone. Accordingly, she concentrated on the political issues of France, and more interestingly, she vindicated women by offering an array of collective female experiences. *The Book of the City of Ladies* evidences the latter case in her career as she embarks on a narration to defend women against the misogynistic discourse and practices of the patriarchal mindset. The work can be elaborated as an example of the medieval dream vision genre in which the narrator usually has a dream of the events recounted in the work by being instructed by symbolic allegorical figures in grandiose settings. As an example of medieval dream vision, *The Book of the City of Ladies* depicts Christine as a character, who has a vision of three allegorical figures, Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude and Lady Justice after reading Matheolus's book. In this vision, these three allegorical figures, representing ideal virtues that women should possess, guide Christine by enabling her to construct a city of ladies. In this process, Christine asks them questions all of which strategically unmask misogynistic blame on women. While the act of building a city offers a metaphorical frame to the narration, it also alludes to de Pizan's writing process as an author. After the introduction of the allegorical characters, de Pizan offers a tripartite structure to her work. The first part consists of Christine's conversation with Lady Reason. In this section, Christine strategically echoes antifeminist discourse in her questions addressed to Lady Reason who challenges the character by amplifying women's capacity for knowledge, reason, and virtue. To justify her points, Lady Reason recounts the stories of pagan women. The second part includes Christine's dialogue with Lady Rectitude, who emphasises female morality. While Christine deals with the aspects of the female experience in the domestic sphere and family institution, Lady Rectitude attempts to disprove the misogynistic approach in the instances of stories from the pagan, Jewish, and Christian history of women. Finally, Christine's encounter with Lady Justice takes place in the last section of the narration. This part consists of the stories of Christian women, and then the narration ends when the construction of the city is completed after the Virgin Mary is declared to be the head of this city. The end of the narration affirms Christian discourse to honour women on purpose as the female author adopts religious doctrine to struggle against the patriarchy in the Middle Ages. The work closes with the completion of the ideal city packed with female citizens who ultimately find a safe home to defend themselves against the misogynistic society. Evidently, de Pizan's utopian city highlights female virtue, knowledge, and power in a way that her narration of women's stories juxtaposes the stereotypical understanding of women in an antifeminist approach. This study digs into de Pizan's vindication of women in her strategic narration based on female experience. It can be concluded that de Pizan's struggle against misogyny is an early example of women's fight against patriarchal confines, and the female author achieves this goal by depending on her personal and collective encounters of women.

INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault, a significant French philosopher and critic, once argued that language significantly operates to reflect experience in that “a primary complicity with the world founds, for us, a possibility of speaking of experience, in it, to designate and name it, to judge it and, finally, to know it in the form of truth”.¹ By the same token, women, excluded from the social, cultural, political, and economic domains, have attempted to leak into the world of literature by using language to convey their own experience in the male-dominated world since ancient times. The reason for their dependence on their female experience emanates from the problematic issue of the muse as a source of inspiration, especially for women poets. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh clarifies the problematic presence of the muse for male and female poets as follows:

Traditionally female (and often ‘anatomically correct’ according to some romanticized female image), the muse has played the role of intermediary for male poets, a source of inspiration, a helpmate into translating experience into art. In confronting the problem of this stereotyped figure, women poets must imagine themselves as both image and imagemaker, subject and object, and reject gendered figures like the conventional muse. In effect, they become their own muses, validating female experience as both starting point and subject of their literary work.²

That is to say, women poets, and women writers in broad terms, use their experience as a source of inspiration or their muse to produce works which offer certain truths about their lives in contrast to the accounts limiting them in certain types. In the medieval period, Christine de Pizan (1363/1364?-1430), who became a professional writer, leaned on female experience to compose her own works. Following an unusual path for medieval women in her life, de Pizan produced literary pieces based on various female experiences. Moving from her personal experience to overall female encounter in the Middle Ages, de Pizan became quite prolific in her writing career in which she dedicated herself to fight against misogyny defaming women. This paper aims to explore one of her significant works, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-1405), and pinpoints that this piece unveils a macrocosmic experience of women in misogynistic medieval society that de Pizan strategically defied.

1. Christine de Pizan as a Medieval Woman Writer

In the Middle Ages, having access to the literary realm for women was a difficult task. Particularly after the 13th century, women could not easily have a chance to lead intellectual activities considering that “the newly founded universities, to which women were denied entrance, provided increasingly sophisticated educational opportunities for men. The exclusion of women from medieval institutions of higher learning widened the distance between male and female spheres of intellectual and professional activity”.³ While women of nobility were advised to learn domestic activities, and women of lower ranks did not have any chance to be educated, those at convents and nunneries had an opportunity to learn reading and/or writing. That is to say, the majority of women lacked literacy, which was one of the reasons for women’s inability to produce work at those times. Moreover, the concept of authorship in medieval times excluded women from the literary sphere as the creative act of writing was associated with the idea of authority that was assumed to belong to men.⁴ This idea can be related to the inferior

¹ Foucault, Michel. “The Discourse on Language,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 228.

² Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle. “Introduction,” in *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art*, ed. Patricia Boyle Haberstroh (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 9.

³ Fiero, Gloria K. “The *Dits*: The Historical Context,” in *Three Medieval Views of Women*, ed. Gloria K. Fiero, Wendy Pfeffer, and Mathé Allain (London: Yale University Press, 1989), 34.

⁴ Summit, Jennifer. “Women and Authorship,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90-91.

status of women structured by the religious discourse. By virtue of the biblical stories, the position of women in society was degraded in two ways. First of all, Eve was thought to be the source of wickedness, and, accordingly, women were accused of being the daughters of Eve in a way that “Eve provided the negative image of womankind [and] had invoked damnation and death”.⁵ This view was supported by the writings of religious and authoritative figures in that the condemnation of the female sex, in other words, misogyny, was transmitted in a great number of works. Additionally, the negative representation of women was reinforced by means of the scientific and medical discussions of the time which “derived a view of the female as a defective male”.⁶ While the image of Eve led to unfavourable stereotyping in the texts, the other female representation with the Virgin Mary was functionally used in that the epitome of perfection for the female sex was idealised in the holy mother's portrait, and this glorification became a tool to control and silence women. Nonetheless, the religious doctrine allowed women to find a place to express themselves on the account that “the Church could not deny women direct access to the divine, through mystical experience unmediated by a human priesthood. Visionary women could bypass the human, male, authority of the Church on earth, and claim to be the instruments of a higher, divine authority”.⁷ As a case in point, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) and Margery Kempe (1373-1438) were able to narrate their spiritual accounts by using the Christian tradition and reveal personal experiences from a female point of view in this way.

Nevertheless, the appearance of women writers cannot be limited to theological texts in the medieval period. Although it was a rare phenomenon, there were few female writers with their secular works. Christine de Pizan was one of those women who exceptionally received a good education and produced texts based on her own experiences and observations. Before dealing with the details of her text in this study, it would be necessary to briefly narrate her life story here. Born in Venice, Christine de Pizan was the daughter of a physician and astrologer at the court of King Charles V in France where she was claimed to live happily in her childhood.⁸ As Astrik L. Gabriel acknowledges, she had a decent education which was a great exemption and privilege for a girl in the late 14th century: “The learned physician gave Christine a thorough education in Latin, in philosophy, and in the various branches of science. She proved herself a good student and showed an extraordinary predilection for learning”.⁹ Upon her father's arrangement, she married a nobleman, Etienne de Castel, at the age of fifteen and became the mother of three children.¹⁰ This marriage was defined as the “[u]nion of heart and mind” as is evident in de Pizan's own depictions of her marital life.¹¹ However, her life was completely shattered when she lost two patriarchal figures in her life. As she lost her father and husband respectively, she was left alone without any financial support. Although remarriage or entrance into a convent might be the case for most medieval women, de Pizan rejected those options in her case. The new circumstances drove her to a different path in her life as she became a professional woman writer to support her family financially.¹² Keiko Nowacka comments on de Pizan's widowhood as a sign of “her belief in women's

⁵ Fiero, “The *Dits*: The Historical Context,” 68.

⁶ Brown-Grant, Rosalind. “Introduction,” in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, by Christine de Pizan (London: Penguin, 1999), xx.

⁷ Barratt, Alexandra. “Introduction,” in *Women's Writing in Middle English*, ed. Alexandra Barratt (London: Pearson, 1992), 6.

⁸ Dufresne, Laura Rinaldi. “Christine de Pizan's *Treasure of the City of Ladies*: A Study of Dress and Social Hierarchy,” *Woman's Art Journal*, 16, No. 2 (1995-1996): 29-34.

⁹ Gabriel, Astrik L. “The Educational Ideals of Christine de Pisan,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16, No. 1 (1995): 3-21.

¹⁰ Hindman, Sandra L. “With Ink and Mortar: Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*,” *Feminist Studies*, 10, No. 3 (1984): pp. 457-483.

¹¹ Gabriel, “The Educational Ideals,” 4.

¹² Petroff, Elizabeth Alvilda. “Women Writers of the Late Fourteenth Century – Seeking Models: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Doña Leonor López de Córdoba, and Christine de Pizan,” in *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 304.

ability for self-governance” and highlights that “her decision to pursue a career as a writer . . . is the clearest indicator of her conscious non-conformity to the acceptable social models open to women”.¹³ That is to say, de Pizan challenged the norms of society and succeeded in her career trajectory. The fact that she was under the patronage of royal figures, ranging from the French king to some dukes, evidences her widely recognised role as a writer in her lifetime.¹⁴

What is more, Christine’s literary career proved that writing was more than a means to earn a living for her. Similar to the poems of the women from the classical times and Old English period, her first works were poems about her personal experiences of widowhood, loss, suffering, and love of her husband.¹⁵ In time, however, she returned to more serious topics as she dealt with the politics of France and defended women in her works. Laura Rinaldi Dufresne encapsulates Christine’s efforts for women, saying: “She attacks the institution of chivalry in the ‘Letter to the God of Love’ and misogyny in her letters on ‘The Romance of the Rose’ and defends the contribution of women to history in *The Book of the City of Ladies*”.¹⁶ In her *oeuvre* of a hundred poems, what becomes clear is that she resisted the discourse defaming women and empowered herself as a writer attacking the anti-feminist approach. As she moved from the personal female experience to the larger context for women in her works, her works were still derived from a wide range of female experiences. The rest of this paper aims to examine Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404-1405) as a work inspired by the female experience in the Middle Ages.

2. Navigating Female Experience in *The Book of the City of Ladies*

To begin with the genre of the text, *The Book of the City of Ladies* can be identified in different ways. Essentially, the work is an example of the medieval dream vision genre in which Christine de Pizan appears as a character and has a vision of three allegorical figures, Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice, upon reading Matheolus’s book.¹⁷ Perplexed by the ideas about her female fellows, Christine is led by three women who help her to build a city of ladies and explain the nature of women unblemished by misogynistic ideas with various examples. Moreover, the work is glossed as “a utopian dream” by M. Bella Mirabella considering the structure of the city, providing women with liberty to conduct their lives without the oppression of the patriarchy.¹⁸ Edward M. Wheat, likewise, regards de Pizan’s text as a utopia and further singles it out as “a political utopia, a ‘city in words,’ to illuminate the problems of the political realm and serve as a guide to political thought and practice”.¹⁹ In essence, de Pizan’s defence of liberty and freedom, according to Wheat, resonates with classical Western political ideas drawn from the philosophy of Plato in that de Pizan’s critical approach, regardless of her feminist outlook, can be situated in “a broader tradition of political philosophy stemming from the classical Greeks”.²⁰ To further argue, the political aspect of the work makes its appearance in de Pizan’s discourse to stand against the misogynistic mindset in the patriarchal medieval society. It is true that this work is compared with Augustine’s (A.D. 354-430) *The City of God* (A.D. 426),²¹ and Boccaccio’s (1313-1375)

¹³ Nowacka, Keiko. “Reflections on Christine de Pizan’s ‘Feminism’,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, 17, No. 37 (2002): 81-97.

¹⁴ Hindman, “With Ink and Mortar,” 459.

¹⁵ Hindman, “With Ink and Mortar,” 458.

¹⁶ Dufresne, “Christine de Pizan’s *Treasure*,” 30.

¹⁷ Verini, Alexandra. “Medieval Models of Female Friendship in Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Margery Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Feminist Studies*, 42, No. 6 (2016): 365-391.

¹⁸ Mirabella, M. Bella. “Feminist Self-Fashioning: Christine de Pizan and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 6, No. 1 (1999): 9-20.

¹⁹ Wheat, Edward M. “‘Now a New Kingdom of Femininity is Begun’: The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of The City of Ladies*,” *Women & Politics*, 20, No. 4 (1999): 23-47.

²⁰ Wheat, “Now a New Kingdom,” 45.

²¹ Richards, Earl Jeffrey. “Introduction,” in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, by Christine de Pizan (New York: Persea, 1982), xxvix.

De Mulieribus Claris (1361), which is claimed to be one of the sources of de Pizan's book.²² As with other medieval texts, the stories of women in de Pizan's text are not original accounts. However, the female characters she makes use of reflect some pieces of her own life story in that the work is elaborated with its autobiographical elements. Cynthia Ho highlights this idea as follows:

In a carefully arranged array of learned women, Christine mirrors her own struggle in moving from dejected identification with misogynist stereotyping to empowerment. The first group of three women – Cornificia, Proba, and Sappho – traces her autobiographical chronology; the second group, with two primary figures – Carmentis and Minerva – moves the theme from individual achievement to women's intellectual enfranchisement.²³

Accordingly, the first group displays de Pizan's interest in learning and education, and the second group mirrors the female knowledge that she defends,²⁴ through which she veils the details of her life to achieve liberty and empowerment. In grounding the genre of the text, what still matters is that the author rests largely on constructive female experience and power, regardless of the fact that her work is an example of dream vision, utopia, political writing or autobiography.

To further argue, de Pizan's female point of view in the narration of her collection of women's stories makes her work an original creation. It is noticeable that her perspective is still conservative in terms of the twenty-first-century perspective, which rather highlights different veins of feminism in an interdisciplinary way by rejecting an essentialist frame in the defence of women's rights. However, her rejection of the antifeminist outlook is revolutionary for such an early text. To excavate the significance of her text, it must be recognised that de Pizan, in Mirabella's words, puts women at the centre of her argument while othering her male opponents: "She becomes primary; the male attackers, secondary, the Other. The position of power she fashions grows out of Christine's belief that she was the one who would answer and refute the established misogynistic arguments of her day".²⁵ In her creation of counterarguments to the misogynistic discourse and practices, she strategically asks a series of questions, and then her narration recounts the stories of various women to reveal more about the female perspective and experience. In this way, the author deliberately fashions herself as a naïve and uninformed speaker in search of answers. Her method in narration can be regarded as a significant manoeuvre through which de Pizan appears to estrange herself from a position of authority so her inexperienced state provides a ground to dig into the genuine experience of womanhood as narrated by women. *The Book of the City of Ladies* is accordingly called "Christine de Pizan's defence of women"²⁶ with the aim of "proving to misogynists and to women themselves that neither virtue nor vice is the prerogative of one sex to the exclusion of the other".²⁷ Her tactic becomes successful in reaching her aim as she intentionally avoids a direct attack on misogynistic discourse and patriarchal authority by presenting the female experience in an unfamiliar way, or in other words, defamiliarizing her attack on misogynists.

Going more into detail of her work, it is initially necessary to focus on the beginning of de Pizan's narration. Christine de Pizan, as the confused narrator of her own work, reveals her main concerns at the outset in that she questions her identity as a woman and the place of the female sex in the literary tradition. As she can "find no evidence from my [her] own experience to bear out such a negative view

²² Erol, Burçin. "Christine de Pisan: Ortaçağ'da Bir Kadın Hakları Savunucusu," *Kuram* 10 (1996): 79-84.

²³ Ho, Cynthia. "Communal and Individual Autobiography in Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*," *CEA Critic*, 57, No. 1 (1994): 31-40.

²⁴ Ho, "Communal and Individual Autobiography," 35, 37.

²⁵ Mirabella, "Feminist Self-Fashioning," 11.

²⁶ Rigby, S. H. "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women," *The Chaucer View*, 35, No. 2 (2000): 133-165.

²⁷ Brown-Grant, "Introduction," xxvii.

of female nature and habits”,²⁸ she deduces that she has to “accept their unfavourable opinion of women since it was unlikely that so many learned men, who seemed to be endowed with such great intelligence and insight into all things, could possibly have lied on so many different occasions”.²⁹ While she feels herself doomed because of her sex, she sees three ladies out of a light. One of them explains their aim to help Christine, who is in great distress because of the misconceptions that she has about her own sex.³⁰ She further discloses that “[t]he female sex has been left defenceless for a long time now, like an orchard without a wall, and bereft of a champion to take up arms in order to protect it”³¹ and declares that it is now Christine’s duty to build a city for women: “[Y]ou are to construct a building in the shape of a walled city, sturdy and impregnable. This has been decreed by God, who has chosen you to do this with our help and guidance. Only ladies who are of good reputation and worthy of praise will be admitted into this city”.³² In the text, Christine’s position as a builder is validated within the Christian doctrine as Margaret Marion Gower explains that “Christine drew on the scriptural and traditional image of the city in order to envision building her case for the personhood and Christian potential of women building a city, whose stones were the stories of the lives of good women, where women could find protection from violent men and vicious ideas”.³³ Moreover, de Pizan echoes Saint Augustine’s title *City of God* in her work’s title and follows his doctrine of God’s “sexless” image in men and women³⁴ so she gives agential power to her own sex. To further argue, the act of building a city is functionally used in de Pizan’s work considering that “[t]he material City of Ladies is thus a metaphor for Christine’s book, which champions the cause of women”.³⁵ Therefore, the task of building refers to the female writer’s creation process as Penelope Haralambidou relates de Pizan’s “act of writing a book to defend women . . . with the construction of an imaginary defensive city”.³⁶ Moreover, Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint expound the construction as a metaphor and clarify it in the following words:

The architectural metaphor that frames the Cité des Dames provides the structure for Christine’s presentation of the way in which knowledge is structured, disseminated, perpetuated, and changed. As the architect of her own city, she develops this metaphor in three stages: First, the excavation of the ‘field of letter’ represents her challenge to conventional wisdom Second, the foundation of the city and its walls reflects her collection of new information. And finally, the buildings and the inclusion of inhabitants symbolize her reconstruction of knowledge. Given the prominence of this metaphor, it should not be surprising that these three stages correspond roughly with the book’s tripartite division.³⁷

As noted above, the metaphor of the city serves for de Pizan to emphasise knowledge and female power. While Christine feels restricted by the misogynist perception, her dialogues with three ladies allow the writer to construct knowledge based on a positive view of women.

²⁸ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin, 1999), 1.1.6.

²⁹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.1.6.

³⁰ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.2.8.

³¹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.3.11.

³² De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.3.11.

³³ Gower, Margaret Marion. “Glorifying God: The Theological Notion of Women in Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la Cite des Dames*,” *Religion & Literature*, 54, No. 1-2 (2022): 185-207.

³⁴ Gower, “Glorifying God,” 187.

³⁵ Hindman, “With Ink and Mortar,” 466.

³⁶ Haralambidou, Penelope. “The Female Body Politic: Enacting the Architecture of *The Book of the City of Ladies*,” *Architecture and Culture*, 8(2020): 385-406.

³⁷ Brabant Margaret and Michael Brint, “Identity and Difference in Christine de Pizan’s *Cité des Dames*,” in *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margaret Brabant (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 210.

After the presentation of the ladies, the first part of the book is dedicated to Christine's dialogue with Lady Reason. This lady is depicted with a mirror in her right hand with which she enables people to realise their true nature. She states that "[w]ith the help of this mirror, I can determine the nature, quantity and essence of all things and can take full measure of them".³⁸ Hindman refers to this mirror as "a symbol of self-knowledge",³⁹ and Lady Reason's presence functions to reveal truth about the female nature.⁴⁰ While they start digging up the ground to lay the foundations of the city, they start their discussion in "the Field of Letters".⁴¹ Christine initially tries to understand the reasons behind male writers' attacks on women when she, with Lady Reason, carries away the first layer of the earth. According to the lady, men attack women for different motivations. While some attack to maintain their power, some project their own misdeeds onto women, and some severely criticise them out of their envy.⁴² To put it differently, the negative representation of women in texts does not prove that the whole female sex is of evilish and malicious nature. Therefore, Matheolus, the writer who confuses Christine, is a good example for Lady Reason to clarify her point. She mentions that "[t]he only way they [men] can release their frustration is to attack women and to try to stop others from enjoying the pleasures that they themselves used to take. You very often see old men such as these going around saying vile and disgusting things, as in the case of your Matheolus, who freely admits that he is just an impotent old man who would still like to satisfy his desires. He's an excellent example to illustrate my point as he's typical of many other similar cases".⁴³

In comparison with other dreamer figures in the dream vision tradition who are slow to understand, Christine asks questions one by one all of which originate from the antifeminist conception. In one instance, she alludes to the scientific view of women's deficiency, and Lady Reason voices an opposite view by using religious discourse. According to her account, God created Eve as Adam's companion, not as his inferior. The female was also created in God's image, and God "endowed both male and female with this soul, which He made equally noble and virtuous in the two sexes".⁴⁴ She also claims that "human superiority or inferiority is not determined by sexual difference but by the degree to which one has perfected one's nature and morals".⁴⁵ Such an explanation not only refuses the accusations of immoral tendency or inferiority of women but also asserts that "it is a human — not a specifically female — trait to be prone to sin".⁴⁶ Upon Christine's doubts about women's refinement, women are said to have an excellent capacity for intellectual development as much as men, and Lady Reason tries to prove it by demonstrating certain examples of women from the past. The examples in the first part mostly belong to the ancient pagan times. To prove female mental capacity, Lady Reason talks about Empress Nicaula, a powerful governor bringing laws and justice to her people,⁴⁷ the French queens and princesses as skilful administrators,⁴⁸ and other strong women using their power for good causes such as Queen Semiramis,⁴⁹ and the Amazons.⁵⁰ Then, Christine's first guide aptly argues that "God has given every woman a good brain which she could put to good use, if she so chose, in all the domains in which the most learned and renowned men excel".⁵¹ Such a remark is of importance as part of the defence of

³⁸ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.3.10.

³⁹ Hindman, "With Ink and Mortar," 464.

⁴⁰ Erol, "Christine de Pisan," 81.

⁴¹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.8.16.

⁴² De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.8.17-18.

⁴³ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.8.18-19.

⁴⁴ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.10.22-23.

⁴⁵ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.10.23.

⁴⁶ Brown-Grant, "Introduction," xxvii.

⁴⁷ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.12.30.

⁴⁸ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.13.31-33.

⁴⁹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.15.35-37.

⁵⁰ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.16.37-39.

⁵¹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.28.59.

women by the female author on the grounds that “in a culture in which women as a sex were frequently attacked on moral grounds, Christine fought the battle for women at the site where they were being assailed by the critics and so had to mount a defence of her sisters in terms of their ability to use their intellect to make reasoned, moral choices”.⁵² Sappho as a noteworthy author,⁵³ Manto with her ability to see the future,⁵⁴ Minerva, the inventor of Greek letters,⁵⁵ Queen Ceres,⁵⁶ and Isis⁵⁷ as the inventors of agricultural methods are mentioned by Lady Reason to illustrate the portraits of successful women. As can be understood, Christine de Pizan deliberately chooses certain female images to support her defence in a way that “[f]or her women readers, she offer[s] a sophisticated example of informed and selective reading of tradition”.⁵⁸ As a case in point, Medea is represented with her learning and interest in arts whereas her tragic and violent story is not narrated.⁵⁹

Moving to the second part of de Pizan's work, the narration presents the character Christine in a dialogue with Lady Rectitude. This lady appears to “construct the houses and buildings inside the walls of the City of Ladies”⁶⁰ with Christine the narrator. This part can be considered a transitory section as the examples given by Lady Rectitude consist of the stories of pagan, Jewish, and Christian women. The second guide attempts to “highlight the moral conduct”⁶¹ of women whose virtue and merits are praised. Christine, this time, asks questions about familial and marital issues, and Lady Rectitude alters her misconceptions. For example, she pinpoints that daughters rather than sons willingly take care of their families and deeply love them.⁶² Yet Christine is still uncertain about women's devotion to and love for their husbands. She even refers to the texts of the male writers who totally deny women's faithfulness. She voices her doubts, declaring that

many authors have advised men to be wise and not to marry at all, on the grounds that there are no women — or hardly any — who are faithful to their spouses. This view is even echoed in the Letter of Valerius to Ruffinus which quotes Theophrastus who, in his book, stated that no wise men would take a wife because women cause trouble, lack affection, and gossip incessantly.⁶³

Upon this account, Lady Rectitude wisely advises Christine not to make general assumptions about women as men and women both have bad and good characteristics. She discloses that “there are many fine women”,⁶⁴ but “some wives are wilful and unreasonable”⁶⁵ like some husbands. Queen Hypsicratea,⁶⁶ Queen Artemisia,⁶⁷ and the wives of Socrates and Seneca⁶⁸ are depicted as women who truly love their husbands. Additionally, women, in contrast to the allegations, are chaste and constant in

⁵² Rigby, “The Wife of Bath,” 137.

⁵³ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.30.60-61.

⁵⁴ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.31.62.

⁵⁵ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.34.66-68.

⁵⁶ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.35.68-69.

⁵⁷ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.36.69.

⁵⁸ McLeod Glenda and Katharina Wilson, “The Misogamous Tradition and *La Cité des Dames*,” in *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margarete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis (Berlin: Gruyter, 1994), 76.

⁵⁹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 1.32.63.

⁶⁰ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.1.91.

⁶¹ Hindman, “With Ink and Mortar,” 466.

⁶² De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.7-11.101-106.

⁶³ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.13.108.

⁶⁴ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.13.110.

⁶⁵ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.13.110.

⁶⁶ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.14.110-112.

⁶⁷ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.16.113-114.

⁶⁸ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.21-22.119-120.

their love for their men as in the cases of Sarah,⁶⁹ Ruth,⁷⁰ Penelope,⁷¹ and Griselda.⁷² Christine and Lady Rectitude also discuss the relationship between the education and morality of the female sex. While the antifeminist attitude blames educated women for corruption, Lady Rectitude upholds that “[t]his view is completely unthinkable and untenable. I’m not saying that it’s a good idea for men or women to study sorcery or any other type of forbidden science, since the Holy Church did not ban people from practising them for nothing. However, it’s just that it’s not true to say that women will be corrupted by knowing what’s right and proper”.⁷³ From the vantage point of this assertion, it can be claimed that Christine de Pizan’s understanding of education does not imperil the morals and virtue of women. Therefore, the female author supports the education of women, and her own father is referred to in the text since he willingly led his daughter to the world of learning. Lady Rectitude tells Christine that

[y]our own father, who was a great astrologer and philosopher, did not believe that knowledge of the sciences reduced a woman’s worth. . . . Rather, it was because your mother, as a woman, held the view that you should spend your time spinning like the other girls, that you did not receive a more advanced or detailed initiation into the sciences. . . . Despite your mother’s opposition, you did manage to glean some grains of knowledge from your studies, thanks to your own natural inclination for learning.⁷⁴

As can be observed, Christine does not criticise men for their negative view of women, but she directly opposes those — men and women — who maintain misogynist practices restricting the development of women.

The last part of the book is dedicated to Lady Justice’s accounts of Christian women, and the third guide brings the Virgin Mary as the head of the city: “She will govern and rule over the city and will fill it with the great host of ladies who belong to her court and household”.⁷⁵ As a common point with the female mystics, therefore, Christine de Pizan presents “the most obvious and unchallengeable source of womanly authority that was available to her”⁷⁶ when she crowns the Virgin Mary as the ruler of the city. The holy woman is accompanied by other revered women such as Mary Magdalene, Saint Catherine, Saint Lucy, and Saint Marina. The high position of these Christian women figures evidences God’s love for women.⁷⁷ Since they sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the Christian faith or to save their virtue and virginity, all of them are blessed with the status of martyrdom. In relation to the use of such figures in the book, Christine Moneera Laennec draws a parallelism as follows:

These martyrs, and more specifically the type of martyrdom they endure, bear interesting similarities to de Pizan’s position as an author and to her technique of argumentation in both her polemical texts and her other works. Their martyrdom all follows the same pattern. Many of them are ‘authoritative’ women who are not only learned and articulate, but who possess verbal powers that often serve to enrage their ‘judges,’ as the men who persecute them are called. They are often (usually as a result of their intellectual challenges)

⁶⁹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.38.142-143.

⁷⁰ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.40.143-144.

⁷¹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.41.144.

⁷² De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.50.156-161.

⁷³ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.36.140.

⁷⁴ De Pizan, *The Book*, 2.36.141.

⁷⁵ De Pizan, *The Book*, 3.1.201.

⁷⁶ Brown-Grant, “Introduction,” xxviii.

⁷⁷ De Pizan, *The Book*, 3.2.203.

threatened with rape by men when they refuse either to be silent or to submit to their persecutors' authority.⁷⁸

That is to say, Christine de Pizan stays on the safe side by adopting the religious discourse and dealing with the exemplary female figures, but she overtly challenges the ideology that oppresses women. In this narration of various women from different times, classes, and places, the author is able to recite a great variety of female experiences. Therefore, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, inspired by female experience, proves to be a "critical and consolatory" work for its reader.⁷⁹ On the one hand, the female writer has a keen eye on the antifeministic discursive and literary tradition. On the other hand, she encourages women to stand out against such negative views and warns them not to be trapped by false accusations. As the construction of the city is completed, and its female habitants enter the city, Christine announces that the city "will not only shelter you all, or rather those of you who have proved themselves to be worthy, but will also defend and protect you against your attackers and assailants, provided you look after it well".⁸⁰ She finally advises women of all ranks to maintain their virtues and get rid of the misogynist ideas in their lives.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Christine de Pizan in *The Book of the City of Ladies* provides the reader with a fertile ground to observe how a female writer wields a creative narrative to resist the means and practices silencing women by strategically attacking them. As the first professional female author, Christine de Pizan defends her fellows through her rejection of misogyny by counting on female experience as both her source of inspiration to create a literary work and her means to educate women at the same time. Leaning on her own experience, she extends the context of her text to a myriad of women's stories from pagan times to the icons of Christian history. By means of her rejection to remain silent, de Pizan resists patriarchal oppression as reflected in different forms of misogynistic attitudes by strategically elaborating on the issue through the questions that Christine, the narrator asks during the construction of utopian female city. Thus, she transgresses the roles attributed to women as she becomes the authoritative voice to unveil more about female experience in different veins. That being so, it can be concluded that de Pizan moves from misogynistic representation of women to female empowerment. Before the rise of feminist writings of women's vindication, de Pizan already established a path to defend her fellows.

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⁷⁸ Laennec, Christine Moneera. "Unladylike Polemics: Christine de Pizan's Strategies of Attack and Defense," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 12, No. 1 (1993): 47-59.

⁷⁹ Finkel, Helen Ruth. "The Portrait of the Woman in the Works of Christine de Pisan," MA Thesis., (Rice University, 1972).

⁸⁰ De Pizan, *The Book*, 3.19.237.

⁸¹ De Pizan, *The Book*, 3.19.238-239.

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