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Ballade III by Christine de Pizan

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Christine de Pizan
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Leander, when he crossed the brine-dark sea,
shipless, sailless, no oars or rowers to press,
but naked, in the dark, in secrecy,
was driven to an act so dangerous
by love of Hero—she of the bright face
who lived at Abydós, her castle home
across the strait from his—so far, so close.

Look at the way Love drives the lover on!

That high-born braveheart swam it frequently—
the arm of sea that lay between Hellás
and his own home—to see her stealthily,
hiding the way his own heart was possessed.
But Fortune, who has done such violence
and injury to so many a virtuous one,
stirred up the waters to a roiling mass.

Look at the way Love drives the lover on!

So in the depth and distance of that sea
Leander lost his life, a heavy cost.
It dealt his lady such a blow that she
leapt from her tower in anguish at her loss.
Both perished in one burst of love's excess.
See then—so that I needn't preach so long—
all you caught up in amorous sickness:

Look at the way Love drives the lover on!

Yet I suspect that now, in our own days,
such love as this is well and truly gone.
But great love still makes half-wits of the wise.

Look at the way Love drives the lover on!

I first happened upon the work of Christine de Pizan for a poet's challenge, looking for a less-known woman poet to translate. I got to know her better while writing an article about her for the Mezzo Cammin Women Poets Timeline project. She lived during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, just on the cusp of the Renaissance, and she introduced her countrymen in France to the works of Petrarch and Boccaccio. Widowed young and forced to find a way to support a family on her own, she began writing poetry for court patrons, but she soon distinguished herself as a thinker during the *Querelle de la Rose*, the debate about the place of women in society, and she went on to write many books. She was the first European woman, as far as we know, to support herself by writing.

In translating a medieval poem for a modern audience, the first decision has to do with form. Should the translator's first concern be with making the text as attractive as possible to the widest range of readers in the target language? Or should the translator respect matters that would have been important to the poet, even at the risk of putting off some readers of the translation? Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kevin Brownlee, in *Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan* (Norton, 1997), chose the first approach and rendered Christine's tight forms in free verse. I think there are good reasons to maintain Christine de Pizan's varying ballade forms.

First, it was important to Christine to adhere closely to the forms that were being developed and described during her early career. That adherence was part of the courtly image she needed to cultivate in order to gain and keep the patronage by which she supported herself and her family. And she loved form; in her many books of poems, she invented forms of all kinds. Second, translation in ballade form maintains the sound patterns of the original poems and gives the reader a more accurate sense of them. Though the ballade had not settled into a fixed three stanzas, eight lines each, plus *envoi*, Christine kept close to that pattern in *Cent Ballades*, and to the rhyme scheme *ab ab bc bc*, with the final *c* line repeated at the end of each stanza. The challenge of the ballade is to stick to those three rhymes only, which Christine does—in this poem, hers are *-ée*, *-age*, and *-onne*—all the while maintaining a tight, ten-syllable line. The ballade's rules are somewhat easier to keep in French, which is more rhyme-rich than English. But the translator can manage gracefully with slant rhyme, keeping the ending consonant but letting the vowel sounds

vary, as with “press” and “face.” And since in English the ballade generally uses iambic rhythms, I have turned Christine’s ten-syllable lines into iambic pentameter. Throughout, I have tried to keep to a middle style, avoiding strained syntax or archaisms.