

Medieval Trolls, Mansplainers, and Bullies: Reading Gontier Col's Letters to Christine de Pizan Through the Lens of Twenty-First-Century Online Feminist Activism

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IN 2015, I WROTE AN ARTICLE about using gender-based violence prevention bystander intervention techniques as an effective theoretical lens through which to read and teach patristic and medieval misogyny in the humanities classroom.¹ Because of the effectiveness of that approach, my background in violence prevention has become a “way of knowing” that now informs all of my research and pedagogy.² As I prepared to teach an advanced undergraduate/graduate course on Medieval and Early Modern Women Authors in Spring of 2017, I kept finding medieval echoes of issues that feminists are addressing in twenty-first-century cyberspace. This article explores one of those echoes; in particular, the ways in which the fifteenth-century French humanist Gontier Col participates in what today's feminists (and others) term “mansplaining,” “trolling,” and “bullying” in his 1401 letters to the medieval author Christine de Pizan. I further argue that such echoes provide important insights into how male privilege and the authority to speak intersect in the Middle Ages and today. Finally—and most importantly—these insights can be used to engage students, researchers, and activists in the classroom and beyond.

1. Elizabeth A. Hubble, “Bringing the Bystander into the Humanities Classroom: Reading Ancient, Patristic, and Medieval Texts on the Continuum of Violence,” *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Literature Classroom: Approaches to Difficult Texts* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Press, forthcoming).

2. I direct the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at the University of Montana-Missoula, and I am the former co-chair of the UM University Council on Student Assault and a trained advocate.

Mansplaining: A Modern Phenomenon?

In Fall 2016, a story about a Twitter exchange between a NASA astronaut (Dr. Jessica Meir) and a man whose Twitter handle is @CaseyOQuin went viral. Meir had tweeted, “My first venture >63,000’, the space equivalent zone, where water spontaneously boils! Luckily I’m suited!” @CaseyOQuin replied, “Wouldn’t say it’s spontaneous. The pressure in the room got below the vapor pressure of the water at room temp. Simple thermo.”³ An ensuing exchange between @CatherineHaines and @Ceilidhann summed up Meir’s experience:

@CatherineHaines: @paulcoxon @Ceilidhann I just realized something. She’s an astronaut and he went to space camp (according to his profile). Wow

@Ceilidhann: @CatherineHaines @paulcoxon What’s the line again about women needing to be twice as qualified to get half the credit?⁴

In other words, Meir had been mansplained. Merriam Webster’s website has a great definition of “mansplaining” as “what occurs when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he’s talking to does.”⁵ @CaseyOQuin’s tweet fulfills all of those requirements, especially his ready assumption that he knows more than Meir.

The term “mansplaining” is credited to Rebecca Solnit and her

3. Mark Pygas, “This Guy Tried to ‘Mansplain’ Space to a Female NASA Astronaut, and It Didn’t Go Well,” *Distractify*, 9 September 2016, <http://distractify.com/trending/2016/09/09/mansplain-space-astronaut>, accessed 5 February 2017. @CaseyOQuin’s actual tweet is hard to find because he deleted his Twitter account during the backlash, but there are screen shots.

4. Pygas, “This Guy Tried to ‘Mansplain’ Space to a Female NASA Astronaut.”

5. “Words We’re Watching: Mansplaining,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/mansplaining-definition-history>, accessed 5 February 2017.

2008 essay “Men Explain Things to Me.” In 2010, the *New York Times* included it as one of their “words of the year.”⁶ Solnit does not actually use the term herself, but her essay resonated with women, especially among academics.⁷ In her essay, Solnit offers several examples of the most egregious “mansplaining” she has experienced in her professional life and states, “But explaining men still assume I am, in some sort of obscene impregnation metaphor, an empty vessel to be filled with their wisdom and knowledge.”⁸ Solnit ends the 2014 postscript to her 2008 essay by stating: “Having the right to show up and speak are basic to survival, to dignity, and to liberty. I’m grateful that, after an early life of being silenced, sometimes violently, I grew up to have a voice, circumstances that will always bind me to the rights of the voiceless.”⁹ She contends that mansplaining “is one way that, in polite discourse, power is expressed—the same power that in impolite discourse and in physical acts of intimidation and violence, and very often in how the world is organized—silences and erases and annihilates women, as equals, as participants, as human beings with rights, and far too often as living beings.”¹⁰ Solnit’s insight—that mansplaining is connected to power and the authority to speak—is key to understanding this phenomenon today and throughout history.

Gontier Col: Medieval Mansplainer

I was reminded of Meir’s experience and Solnit’s analysis when I was rereading Gontier Col’s letters (dated 13 and 15 September 1401) to Christine de Pizan, in which he calls her out for her audacity in offering an “invective” against the thirteenth-century medieval bestseller *Le Roman de la rose*, begun by Guillaume de Lorris and continued (at great length) by Jean de Meun (who is accorded primary author status by Col and

6. Rebecca Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me,” *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Press, 2014), 12–13.

7. See the tumblr “Academic Men Explain Things to Me” at <http://mansplained.tumblr.com/>.

8. Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me,” 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 15.

10. *Ibid.*, 14.

many others).¹¹ These letters are part of what is now known as “The Debate” or “Quarrel of the Rose.” I started to ponder the ways in which it appeared (to me, at least) that Col was participating in “mansplaining” as defined above. Col was one of King Charles VI’s secretaries and an early French humanist, and his first letter’s ostensible purpose was to request a copy of Christine’s critique of his colleague Jean de Montreuil’s treatise on *Le Roman de la rose* in which Christine condemns the obscenity and misogyny of *Le Roman*.¹² Col follows standard medieval letter-writing conventions by addressing the letter to the “prudent, honoree et sçavent demoiselle Cristine, Femme de hault et eslevé entendement, digne d’onneur et recommandacions grans” (To the wise, honorable, and learned Lady Christine, Woman of high intelligence, worthy of honor and high praise).¹³ However, the rest of the letter almost forces the reader to see that opening as irony because he goes on to say:

Et comme dient les relateurs ou referandaires de ceste chose, t’efforces et estudies de le reprendre et chargier de faultes en ta dicte œvre nouvelle: laquelle chose me vient a grant amiracion et merveille inestimable, et a ce non croire me meut l’experience et exercite de toy d’avoir sceu, leu et entendu lui ou dit livre et en ses autres fais en françois, et autres plusieurs et divers docteurs, aucteurs et poetes.¹⁴

(And, as I was told by those who recounted these matters to me, in your new work you attempt to contradict him [de Meun] and to accuse him of errors. I am very much astonished by this because from what I have heard about you, I cannot believe that you have read and understood this book or his other works in French, nor those written by several other masters, authors, and poets.)

11. *Debating the Roman de la rose: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Christine McWebb (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 114.

12. Please note: I am referring to Col by his last name and Christine by her first because of the changing nature of last names in late medieval France. “de Pizan” is simply a reference to Christine’s place of birth in Italy, rather than an actual last name.

13. *Debating*, 114. I am using Christine McWebb’s translations. I note where I have made changes based on my own reading of the Middle French.

14. *Ibid.*

In short, Col tells Christine, “I can’t believe you actually understood *Le Roman de la rose* so let me set you straight.”

Col’s assumption that he knows more than Christine is profound, and he fulfills another aspect of the Miriam-Webster definition of mansplaining completely: “he has incomplete knowledge,” because, as he himself states, he has not actually read her treatise. Thus, the primary purpose of this letter is not to refute her arguments. I am also not convinced that his purpose is to procure a copy of her work to analyze and refute. Rather, it is to assert his (and Jean de Meun’s) “authority” by informing Christine de Pizan (a well-read, educated, literate woman) of something that she just does not seem to get—that the primary author of *Le Roman de la rose*, Jean de Meun, was a master (*maistre* in Col’s words), and she has no business questioning him. The term “authority” (or, rather, its Latin equivalent *auctoritas*) is a loaded one in medieval studies, and in both Meir’s and Christine’s experiences, their mansplainers are convinced of their own “authority” to correct a woman’s assumed “ignorance and errors.”

In the political climate of early 2017, the nature of authority is again at issue. As I wrote this article, I reflected deeply on what I meant by that term. Ultimately, I am defining “authority” in this article as “status conferred on someone based on their privilege.” A person with privilege can also assume authority based on that privilege. Following Peggy McIntosh’s classic article, I define “privilege” as “an invisible package of unearned assets that a person can count on cashing in each day, but about which they are ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”¹⁵

My definition of “authority” differs in some important ways from the medieval understanding of the Latin term *auctoritas*, which is the origin of our modern English term. In particular, the medieval concept of *auctoritas* is connected to authorship in ways that twenty-first-century understandings of authority are not. Part of the theoretical work I put into this article was teasing out what that distinction was, and how a

15. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” 1988, <https://www.csusm.edu/sjs/documents/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf>, accessed 11 February 2017. This essay and various versions of it are widely available, under this title and others.

medieval writer like Gontier Col negotiated his own understanding and deployment of *auctoritas*, authority, and privilege. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that Col's claims of *auctoritas* are predicated not on learning or expertise but on nothing more than unearned male privilege and the authority it confers.

A. J. Minnis's book *The Medieval Theory of Authorship* explores the ways in which medieval writers constructed their notions of authorship through their understanding and deployment of *auctoritas*.¹⁶ Minnis argues that we cannot unproblematically apply modern literary theory concepts to medieval texts. Rather, we must acknowledge that the sophisticated thinkers of the Middle Ages had their own version of literary theory that was "centered on the concepts of *auctor* and *auctoritas*."¹⁷ Minnis states, "the work of an *auctor* was a book worth reading; a book worth reading had to be the work of an *auctor*. No 'modern' writer could decently be called an *auctor* in a period in which men saw themselves as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, i.e. the 'ancients'."¹⁸ This definition means that neither Col nor Christine could be considered *auctores*, and their writings cannot be accorded *auctoritas*.

Today, the word "author" has been (at least somewhat) semantically separated from the etymologically-related term "authority," but in medieval literary theory "[t]he *auctor* remained an authority, someone to be believed and imitated."¹⁹ Minnis goes on to argue, "In a literary context, the term *auctor* denoted someone who was at once a writer and an authority, someone not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed."²⁰ Col's defense of Jean de Meun fits Minnis's definition nicely. However, that Jean de Meun or any literary/vernacular writer had *auctoritas* was not a given. As Minnis explains, the expansion of what an *auctor* was only comes with "the changing attitudes to literature which

16. A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

17. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 1.

18. *Ibid.*, 12.

19. *Ibid.*, 5.

20. *Ibid.*, 10. Throughout this article, I am being careful to distinguish between my use of the word "writer" and my use of the word "author."

characterise [sic] the later Middle Ages.”²¹ Minnis actually uses Jean de Meun as an example of that expansion in his final chapter. However, Minnis contends that de Meun is not an *auctor* but rather a *compiler*: “The greatest medieval compilation of *auctoritates* on love is perhaps Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*.”²² Col’s bestowing of *auctoritas* on de Meun demonstrates that by the early fifteenth century, de Meun has gone from a *compiler* of *auctoritates* to an *auctor* in his own right, at least in the eyes of his “disciples” who wish to use his *auctoritas* to establish their own. Minnis does not explicitly discuss the gendered aspects of *auctoritas*. However, a close reading of Col’s letters (and Christine’s response) illuminates Col’s gendered understanding of *auctoritas* and thus provides parallels to twenty-first-century understandings of male privilege and how that privilege confers authority, if not *auctoritas*.

My students are always shocked to realize that Col has not actually read what Christine wrote, but that he is nevertheless sure that she is wrong. For Col, because she is not a *docteur*, *auteur*, or *poete*, she IS wrong, no matter what she wrote. From the twenty-first-century perspective of my students, Christine was both an *auteur* and *poete*, if not a *docteur*, underlining Minnis’s argument about the medieval understanding of *auctoritas* as not something that was simply gained by writing. Christine’s writings do rely on *auctores* and *auctoritates*, but that does not *a priori* confer either authority or *auctoritas*. From a medieval perspective, she is not an *auctor*. Moreover, from Col’s perspective, she does not have access to authority or *auctoritas*. My students often wonder if he would be so sure of that if she were not a woman.

In other words, is it possible to argue that he is rejecting her writings based on medieval literary theory rather than her gender? For example, Col uses the adjective “nouvelle” to describe her writings.²³ As Minnis demonstrates, new writings are not considered sources of *auctoritas*. Col further implies that he knows the people who are able to understand an *auctor* and his *auctoritas*. And, because he has only “heard” about her, she is not part of that group. His peers are the people who have access to

21. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 165.

22. *Ibid.*, 197.

23. *Ibid.*, 114.

a university education, thus connecting his argument against Christine's writings to "education-based privilege" rather than explicitly to gender. Christine has not attended university and is not one of Col's colleagues, therefore Col can claim an authority to speak that Christine cannot. But are these arguments about the novelty and marginality of Christine's writings truly separate from her gender? In the Middle Ages, formal education was closed to women, so Christine's outsider status is ultimately predicated on her lack of unearned male privilege, as defined by McIntosh. Thus, even an argument that does not appear to be explicitly based in gender is actually all about gender privilege.

This connection to education-based privilege is therefore where Col reveals his prejudice against her gender. His prejudice is made explicit when he expresses doubt that she is the source of her writings but posits that she is being used as "chappe a pluye pour dire que plus y sauroient que une femme et plus reprimer la renommee indeficient entre les mortelx d'un tel homme" (a buffer, so that they may say they knew more about this than a woman, further tarnishing the unjustified ill reputation of such a man [Jean de Meun]).²⁴ In other words, the male slanderers of de Meun hope that Col and his allies will criticize Christine instead of focusing on them—the real (read: male) threat to de Meun's legacy.

In her essay "Men Explain Things to Me," Solnit begins with the anecdote that inspired her to reflect on the phenomenon of men explaining things to women who are experts in the area being explained. As she recounts, she was trying to leave a 2003 party in Aspen, Colorado, when the host, "an imposing man who'd made a lot of money," asked her to stay so he could talk to her. He said to her, "So? I hear you've written a couple of books." Solnit was, at that time, the author of six or seven books. She shared that her most recent book was *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*. Her host interrupted her to say "And have you heard about the *very important* Muybridge book that came out this year?"

So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow

24. *Debating*, 114–16.

missed it. He was already telling me about the very important book—with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own *authority* [emphasis mine]. Mr. Very Important was going on smugly about this book I should have known when [Solnit’s friend] interrupted him to say, “That’s her book.” Or tried to interrupt him anyway. . . . She had to say, “That’s her book” three or four times before he finally took it in. . . . That I was indeed the author of the very important book it turned out he hadn’t read, just read about in the *New York Times Book Review* a few months earlier.²⁵

There is a striking similarity here to what Col accuses Christine of—that she is not actually the “brains” of her writings. Even though he has not read them, Col suspects that she is a pawn of learned (yet wrong) men. In Solnit’s case, we also have a man erasing Solnit’s writings in order to expound on his own authority about a book he also has not actually read, not able to imagine that the book (about the same subject as her book) is by her. Thus, male interlocutors position Solnit and Christine *a priori* as inferior *writers* to imagined male *authors*.

Solnit’s experience parallels that of NASA astronaut Jessica Meir and Christine de Pizan, and all three epitomize “mansplaining.” In all three cases, a man assumes that a given woman cannot possibly understand or have full knowledge of x, y, or z, and it is incumbent upon him to mansplain it to her. By virtue of their unearned male privilege, Solnit’s host, @CaseyOQuin, and Gontier Col feel authorized to speak as authorities on subjects about which they are not experts. Col’s authority rests on his male privilege, which also allows him access to another axis of privilege—education. In his worldview, his authority supersedes his ignorance of Christine’s actual treatise. Solnit’s host’s privilege is likewise based in his gender and also in his socio-economic status, both of which allow him to assume an authority that supersedes his ignorance of who actually wrote the unread but *New York Times Book Review*-authorized text to which he refers. @CaseyOQuin’s privilege appears to be founded solely on his gender; that is the epitome of mansplaining: unearned

25. Solnit, “Men Explain Things to Me,” 1-3.

male privilege confers a belief in one's authority to speak in and control public spaces. And if assertions of authority through mansplaining are not enough to silence these learned women, other tactics will need to be deployed, as Col demonstrates.

Col the Gendertroll

When Christine refuses to be silenced and retract her criticism of *Le Roman de la rose*, Gontier shoots back (within one or two days—his first letter is dated 13 September 1401, and the second 15 September 1401) with a letter that drips with condescension, anger, irritation, and impatience. He begins by literally preaching to her in a passage that draws from the Gospel of Matthew, and he ends his introductory “sermon” with either a copying or intentional mistake, saying that if a friend (gendered male by Col) refuses to retract his errors, one must consider him “tanquam eunucus et publicanus,” (as though a eunuch and publican) from Matthew 18:17—which actually reads “sicut ethnicus et publican” (as a heathen and publican/tax collector).²⁶

Col's new tactics to silence Christine parallel, in important ways, the tactics used by Internet trolls to silence women and other marginalized voices. In *Gendertrolling: How Misogyny Went Viral*, Karla Mantilla defines trolling as “making online comments or engaging in behaviors that are purposefully meant to be annoying or disruptive. . . . The behavior is committed with the express purpose of tweaking, upsetting, or enraging others.”²⁷ Mantilla's book goes beyond what she terms generic trolling to explore gendertrolling, which her in-depth interviews and case studies demonstrate is “precipitated by women asserting their opinions online.”²⁸ Thus, the goal of gendertrolling is to silence women in online spaces and to punish those who refuse to be silenced. That goal matches Col's aim of silencing Christine and forcing her to

26. *Debating*, 134. Col's version therefore becomes a bizarre mistake/intentional sexualization of this passage.

27. Karla Mantilla, *Gendertrolling: How Misogyny Went Viral* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 4.

28. *Ibid.*, 12.

acknowledge de Meun's *auctoritas* (and Col's own authority). Like Col, when some men are confronted with the threat of a woman with a voice, they become gender trolls and respond with *ad hominem* attacks, explicit (yet flawed) appeals to a quite medieval understanding of *auctoritas*, anger, and violence.

Between Col's first and second letter, Christine forwarded him her treatise. Once he has it, he has two choices: 1) acknowledge it; or 2) put it under erasure. He chooses the latter. Thus, rather than using his second letter to refute particular points of her argument, Col abandons any pretense of debating Christine's ideas in order to deploy an *ad hominem* attack on Christine as a woman, not as a thinker. He states:

Et je te aime loyaument pour tes vertus et merites, t'ay premiere-
ment par une mienne lettre, que avant yer t'envoyay, exortée, avisée
et priée de toy corriger et amender de l'erreur et magnifeste folie ou
demence trop grant a toy venue par presompcion ou outrecuidance
et comme femme pacionnée en ceste matiere—ne te desplaise se je
dy voir.²⁹

(Since I love you loyally for your virtues and merits, I sent you, the day before yesterday, a first letter in which I begged, exhorted, and advised you to retract your error and manifest foolishness or lunacy which was caused by your presumption or conceit³⁰ as a woman passionate about this matter—be not angered with me for speaking the truth.)

Here Col begins to directly attack her gender with his references to potential mental instability and to her immoderate emotion. He further uses the term “voir” (truth) to refer to his argument.³¹ But there is no “truth” in his letter. He provides no facts or arguments that refute Christine's work. The truth to which Col appears to be referring is that Christine is a foolish woman who will not acknowledge that he and de

29. *Debating*, 134.

30. McWebb's translation combines “presompcion ou outrecuidance” as “pretentiousness.” I have separated the words back out.

31. *Ibid.*

Meun have the right to irreproachable *auctoritas*, something from which Christine is excluded, not because of her ideas but because of her gender.

In fact, Col cannot acknowledge her ideas because if he does, he has already lost. His argument is not with her writings but with her violation of gendered norms. If he admits that her arguments are debatable, he will have allowed her entry into the masculine space where learned ideas are exchanged. Christine's status as a woman is the location of the threat, not her arguments. Writing is a masculine pursuit (as Christine herself notes in her work "La Mutacion de fortune," see below). Col is threatening Christine for attempting to enter that masculine space where male privilege confers authority and, Col seems desperately to hope, *auctoritas*. His only option is an *ad hominem* attack that allows him to ignore her learning.

This aspect of the exchange of letters between Christine and Gontier Col again recalls twenty-first-century examples of "trolling." Witness what happened when astrophysicist Katherine J. Mack took to Twitter to express her concern about climate change.³² A Twitter user named Gary P. Jackson replied, "Maybe you should learn some actual SCIENCE then, and stop listening to the criminals pushing the #GlobalWarming SCAM!" Mack replied "@gary4205 I dunno, man, I already went and got a PhD in astrophysics. Seems like more than that would be overkill at this point." Jackson doubled down and replied, "Then you should ask for a refund because they failed to teach you the most basics [*sic*] of science."³³ Jackson's rejection of Mack's degree as authoritative is not necessarily tied to gender, but the connection can be supported by the similarities to the experiences of Meir, Solnit, and Christine.

Jackson's reply reveals that authority and expertise are not synonymous. In today's world, two things that prove someone's expertise are

32. Chris York, "Astrophysicist Dr Katherine J Mack Destroys Climate Change Sceptic Troll," *Huffington Post UK*, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/astrophysicist-twitter-trolls_uk_57b2c60de4bo2fb3274b64ad, accessed 28 January 2017.

33. Laura Bates, "Mansplaining: How not to Talk to Female Nasa Astronauts," *Guardian.com*, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2016/sep/13/mansplaining-how-not-talk-female-nasa-astronauts>, accessed 28 January 2017.

advanced degrees and citations of one's work. Mack, Meir, and Solnit have those markers of expertise, which should lead to a public recognition of their authority, but when it intersects with their less-privileged gender, that assumption of authority is compromised, similarly to what is seen in the exchange between Christine and Col. Expertise is connected to earned advantages, not unearned privilege. Gary Jackson's erasure of Mack's education demonstrates that authority supersedes expertise in public spaces like the internet and is unquestionably connected to male privilege. Mack's gender intersects with her expertise, and the gendered axis allows Jackson to erase/deny her education as authoritative. For Col, Christine's gender functions in much the same way. Christine's learning poses a threat to Col's male privilege, to his ability to assume authority, and to any hope that he might someday be considered an *auctor*, and that scares him.

Thus, Col (like all gendertrolls)³⁴ reveals that he is motivated by fear, something that he underscores with his next tactic. As a result of his fear, Col runs to hide behind the institutions that maintain his privilege and her oppression. To that end, he falls back on the Bible as his ultimate source of *auctoritas*. Col's invocation of "la Sainte Escripiture" at the beginning of his second letter demonstrates his reliance on medieval notions of *auctoritas*—because Christine obviously did not accept that Jean de Meun is an *auctoritas* (as Col argued in his first letter), he will alter his "argument" to emphasize the Bible rather than de Meun's mastery of theology as he did in his first letter. As Minnis argues, it is not a given that a writer working in the vernacular (like Jean de Meun) can be called an *auctor*. Therefore, Col is at pains to emphasize de Meun's mastery of the greatest source of *auctoritas*: the Bible. In his second letter, Col states that de Meun was a "tres excellant et inreprehensible docteur en sainte divine Escripiture, hault philosophe et en toutes les .vii. ars liberaulx clerc tres parfond" (very³⁵ excellent and irrefutable

34. A generic troll may be motivated solely by their own entertainment in causing anger. However, as Mantilla demonstrates, gendertrolls are driven by misogyny and regularly take their attacks beyond generic trolling, thus revealing their fear and anger.

35. McWebb's translation does not include the word "very" for "tres," but I think Col's overblown rhetoric demands it.

master of Holy Scripture, renowned philosopher, and expert in all seven liberal arts).³⁶ Thus, de Meun's *auctoritas* is a product of his mastery of the "sainte divine Escripiture," and therefore, it is above critique (irreprehensible). Col and de Meun are both protected from criticism by a monolithic deployment of biblical *auctoritas*; that is, an attack on them is an attack on God.

Religion and the Bible are still institutions used to maintain privilege and confer authority. Today, internet trolls may rely less on the Bible than a medieval author did (depending on the debate), but they do use a quite medieval notion of *auctoritas* to maintain their privileged positions in public spaces, such as the internet. Internet trolls find that *auctoritas* by relying on and hiding behind a misapplication/intentional misunderstanding of the First Amendment to the US Constitution: by claiming they are just exercising their right to free speech. The Constitution thus functions as their monolithic conferrer of *auctoritas*. One of the best examples of this "hiding behind the First Amendment" is notorious troll Milo Yiannopoulos, whose debate at the University of Manchester in 2015 was entitled "From Liberation to Censorship: Does Modern Feminism Have a Problem with Free Speech?"³⁷ Yiannopoulos and his followers regularly assert his right to verbally attack women (and others) under the cover of the First Amendment. For example, when Yiannopoulos was banned from Twitter for his attacks on actress Leslie Jones, @scrowder tweeted, "Good lord, Twitter will never get it. An anti-free speech communication platform will lose its value."³⁸

In her *Pace Law Review* article "Abuse and Harassment Diminish Free Speech," legal scholar Anita Bernstein argues that claims of "free speech" by trolls are actually examples of censorship wherein the only

36. *Debating*, 134.

37. Anonymous, "The White Knights of the First Amendment," *Ms. Magazine Blog*, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2016/09/14/the-white-knights-of-the-first-amendment/>, accessed 11 February 2017.

38. Elle Hunt, "Milo Yiannopoulos, Rightwing Writer, Permanently Banned from Twitter," *Guardian.com*, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/20/milo-yiannopoulos-nero-permanently-banned-twitter>, accessed 12 February 2017. Yiannopoulos is one of a handful of internet trolls permanently banned from Twitter.

voices allowed in the public space that is the internet are those that do not question the status quo of straight, white, male privilege.³⁹ Moreover, the author [Anonymous] of “The White Knights of the First Amendment” argues, we only need ask who benefits from these First Amendment claims to see that the purpose is anything but protecting people’s free speech. Anonymous cites legal scholars Alice Marwick and Russ Miller who write, “Research suggests that those most likely to be victims of hateful, online speech are women, sexual minorities, and people of color. In other words, harassment breaks down along traditional lines of power.”⁴⁰ Thus, Anonymous argues, “the current defense of the First Amendment is not a defense of open conversation and free speech—it is a defense of harassment and a defense of those who wish to wield inflammatory rhetoric elevating white supremacy, misogyny and homophobia without consequence or criticism.” That is exactly what Col is doing—relying on the Bible to silence a woman who criticizes the misogyny of Jean de Meun. The fact that today’s First Amendment defenders’ arguments so closely parallel Col’s pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment arguments are further proof that free speech is anything but the goal of those defenders. The goal, is, rather, to maintain the systems of privilege that confer male authority by hiding behind medieval understandings of *auctoritas* that allow trolls to label texts such as the Bible and the US Constitution as above question.

When *ad hominem* attacks and claims of a higher *auctoritas* do not have the desired effect, gendertrolls respond with threats of violence and anger. Col participates in this escalation of silencing tactics when he states that he is still willing to take “pitié de” Christine and grant her “penitence salutaire” if she retracts her words publicly.⁴¹ Through his use of the word “salutaire,” he appears to be both accusing her of sin

39. Anita Bernstein, “Abuse and Harassment Diminish Free Speech,” *Pace Law Review* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 1–30.

40. Alice Marwick and Ross Miller, “Online Harassment, Defamation, and Hateful Speech: A Primer of the Legal Landscape,” *Fordham Center on Law and Information Policy Report No. 2*, Center on Law and Information Policy at Fordham Law School, 10 June 2014, 5, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2447904.

41. *Debating*, 134.

and then giving himself (as a cleric) the ability to forgive her sin. And what is her sin? Questioning his authority and de Meun's/the Bible's *auctoritas*. In declaring her a sinner, Col is echoing another biblical passage: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Timothy 2:12). Therefore, Col posits, Christine is in violation of God's word and must publicly repent.

Col continues on to state that if she does not retract her treatise, as one of de Meun's "vraies et loyaux disciples" (true and loyal disciples), he will be forced ("avant que je me mette en peine d'escire") to denounce her in writing.⁴² He ends this letter by invoking God and by informing her that "ce soit dommage se plus demouroies en tel erreur soubz les tenebres d'ignorance" (It would be a shame is you remained any longer in the darkness of error and ignorance).⁴³ Ultimately, he is threatening her with damnation if she does not stop attacking de Meun's (read: Col's) *auctoritas*.

Thus, Col's efforts to silence Christine parallel the constant abuse that online feminists experience from internet trolls. Col's and the trolls' ultimate goal is to silence women (and other marginalized groups) who threaten their privilege to be the authorities on whatever topic arises. Women entering public spaces force (some) men to question their own privilege, and that reveals the constructed nature of their authority, thus threatening it with deconstruction. In short, if only Christine would shut up, Col would not have to question his own privilege and "right" to authority. Therefore, he must threaten her to protect his status. Similarly, online feminist journalist Lindy West's articles about anything feminist-related force members of the hegemony to face those voices that disagree with them. Therefore, West must also be silenced, censored, and/or erased. Internet trolls (and scholastic/textual trolls like Col) work to prove to women, and thus, to themselves, that women do not belong in public spaces.

I first became familiar with West in February 2015 through an article she wrote entitled "What Happened When I Confronted my Cruellest

42. "Disciples" is an interesting word choice that places de Meun in the position of Jesus and Col in the position of a disciple.

43. *Ibid.*, 134.

[sic] Troll.” In that article, she wrote: “Sometimes the hate trickles in slowly, just one or two messages a day. But other times, when I’ve written something particularly controversial (ie feminist)—like, say, my critique of men feeling entitled to women’s time and attention, or literally anything about rape—the harassment comes in a deluge. It floods my Twitter feed, my Facebook page, my email, so fast that I can’t even keep up (not that I want to).”⁴⁴

Her piece echoes Bernstein’s legal argument, and also illuminates the “true” motivation behind Col’s attacks on Christine. West continues on to write: “And even ‘innocuous’ harassment, when it’s coming at you en masse from hundreds or even thousands of users a day, stops feeling innocuous very quickly. It’s a silencing tactic. The message is: you are outnumbered. The message is: we’ll stop when you’re gone. . . . Who gets trolled has a direct impact on who gets to talk; in my personal experience, the fiercest trolling has come from traditionally white, male-dominated communities (comedy, video games, atheism) whose members would like to keep it that way.”⁴⁵ Col very much wants to silence Christine and maintain the status quo. And, while he does not deploy threats of sexual violence or murder, he does threaten her with a medieval equivalent: God’s damnation.

West notes that often the police (the authorities?!) participate in this silencing when they recommend that women simply get off the internet, as if that was a possibility for someone like West, whose profession is online journalism. As Bernstein argues: “The recipient of abuse who leaves the Internet because she finds conditions there intolerable necessarily experiences displacement. She forfeits a conduit of communication. She loses social and professional gains that she would have enjoyed absent abuse and harassment. *Ceteris paribus* she writes less, learns less, teaches less, holds less power.”⁴⁶ In fact, on January 3, 2017, Lindy West announced, “I’ve left Twitter. It is unusable for anyone but trolls,

44. Lindy West, “What Happened When I Confronted my Cruellest Troll,” *Guardian.com*, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/02/what-happened-confronted-cruellest-troll-lindy-west>, accessed 4 February 2017.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Bernstein, “Abuse and Harassment Diminish Free Speech,” 5.

robots and dictators.”⁴⁷ About her Twitter departure, West states, “The breaking point for me wasn’t the trolls themselves—it was the global repercussions of Twitter’s refusal to stop them.” West did not leave the internet, just Twitter, but her departure is exactly what Bernstein is demonstrating in her article—that by not regulating the violence of their users, Twitter (and its tacitly authorized trolls) diminished West’s free speech, and erased her from one public space.

Similarly, Col is demanding that Christine emulate West’s departure from public discourse. Christine **MUST** leave the public space of educated discourse and apologize for having entered it in the first place. For Col, as for West’s trolls, her words do not exclude her from the public space: her gender does, because it cannot be allowed to confer any authority to speak publicly, as Christine herself acknowledges in her 1402/03 poem “La Mutacion de fortune” wherein she writes:

Mais, pour mieulx donner a entendre
La fin du proces ou veuil tendre,
Vous diray qui je suis, qui parle,
Qui de femelle devins masle
Par Fortune, qu’ainsy le vould.⁴⁸

(But, to better make understood the end of the process that I want to tell, I will tell you who I am, who is speaking, and how I, a female, became a male, because Fortune wanted it thus.)

This poem, notably begun within a year of her exchange of letters with Col, evidences her awareness of gender constructions and how her gender worked to prevent her from undertaking a writing career to support her family after the deaths of her father and husband. In order to write, she “becomes male”: she undertakes a masculine pursuit. She might have

47. Lindy West, “I’ve left Twitter. It is Unusable for Anyone but Trolls, Robots and Dictators,” *Guardian.com*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/03/ive-left-twitter-unusable-anyone-but-trolls-robots-dictators-lindy-west>, accessed 4 February 2017.

48. Christine de Pisan, *Le Livre de la mutacion de fortune*, ed. Suzanne Solente (Paris: Picard, 1959), lines 139-43. Translation my own.

learned this lesson as a result, at least in part, of her treatment at the hands of Col, whose threats against her were never about her intelligence or writing.⁴⁹ Ultimately, as all gendertrolls demonstrate, Col reveals himself to be not an *auctoritas*, but to be nothing more than a bully relying on his unearned male privilege to assume authority.

BINGO: Gontier Col Masters “Bully Bingo”

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a bully as “a blustering, browbeating person; especially: one who is habitually cruel, insulting, or threatening to others who are weaker, smaller, or in some way vulnerable.” When I first proposed this article, one of the editors of this collection asked if I was familiar with an article entitled “Bully Bingo: 52 Signs Someone Will Say Anything to Win an Argument.”⁵⁰ As I read through it, I was shocked by how many of those fifty-two signs Col deploys in his two short letters. Four of the fifty-two stand out, but he is guilty of many of them:

#2: Little or no admission of their subjectivity.

Col presents himself as the neutral purveyor of unbiased “truth.” He says so himself: “ne te desplaise se je dy voir” (be not angered with me for speaking the truth).⁵¹ Col’s real truth, however, is that he is in a position of privilege wherefrom his opinion is supposed to be accepted by all as unbiased fact, and Christine (in her person and in her writing) cannot be allowed to challenge his “truth.”

In this same passage, Col is constructing a “straw man” argument in which he predicts that Christine will be upset by him speaking the

49. It is significant that Christine started writing, at least in part, to support her family after the deaths of her father and husband. Thus, Col’s attempts to drive her from that public space have implications for her living, as Bernstein notes.

50. Jeremy Sherman, “Bully Bingo: 52 Signs Someone Will Say Anything to Win an Argument,” Altnet.org, <http://www.altnet.org/personal-health/how-tell-someone-will-say-anything-win-argument>, accessed 4 February 2017.

51. *Debating*, 134.

“truth.” That then gives him a false pretense to dismiss her because she’s too emotional (something of which he has no evidence), which connects to #8 on the Bully Bingo list:

#8: “Because you’re upset, you’re wrong.”

Col’s “straw man” argument relies on sexist stereotypes, and thus functions to reveal his actual problem: she’s a woman, and, therefore, whatever she writes is *a priori* dismissable:

**#30 “I don’t have to consider your opinion
because you’re one of those!”**

Col has placed Christine in the category of “dismissable fools,” as evidenced when he accuses her of “folie.”⁵²

And, finally, “Bully Bingo” includes a modern take on *auctoritas* (renamed here as my new favorite term “Toga-cred”):

**#21 “I must be right because I’m quoting someone ancient.”
(AKA Toga-cred).**

Col is also guilty of #1 Playing Judge; #18 Playing Interrogator; #19 Throwing their books at you; #20 “A lot of people agree with me so I must be right”; #35 Insistent reply; #46 Reiteration as reasoning; and #48 “You’re a biased ideologue; I’m a neutral observer”; and potentially others. Through his bullying tactics, Col allies himself with today’s gendertrolls thus revealing his true purpose: maintaining his position of privilege which allows him to assume authority and confer *auctoritas* on his *maistre*, if not himself.

Christine Replies

When I teach these letters, students are always quick to point out Col’s flaws. For example, that Col is obviously emotional as he writes his second letter, and yet it is Christine whom he accuses of being immoderately emotional—his *ad hominem* attack has become an *ad hominem tu quoque* attack. Students are buoyed by Christine’s late September 1401

52. Ibid.

response to Col's letters, in which she reveals that she is well aware of his bullying attacks:

Et pour vouloir emplir ton bon mandement le t'ay envoye; par quoy, après la veue et visitacion d'icellui, comme ton erreur pointee et touchee de verité, meü de impacience m'as escript tes .ii.ème lettres plus injurieuses reprochant mon femenin sexe.⁵³

(In response to your kind request, I sent you a copy of this treatise, which, after you had read it thoroughly, led you to write me, with impatience, a second letter, in which you commit a poignant error removed from the truth by reproaching my female sex.⁵⁴)

Christine's rhetorical savvy and intelligence are on great display here as she ironically states that, since she sent Col her treatise, of course, he has studied it. The juxtaposition of "visitacion d'icellui" and "impacience" are markers that Christine recognizes that Col is not interested in the content of her work—his quick reply reveals that he has had little time to study her work.

She reads his threats against her (that she is like Matthew's publican and destined to live in the shadows) as just what they are—signs of his own emotionality and lack of neutrality:

[N]e seuffres a propre volenté tenir close la soubtilleté de ton engin! Regardes droit selon voye theologienne la plus souveraine et tut ant ne condampneras mes dis ainsi comme les ay escripts, et considereras se louange affiert es pas particuliers que ilz repprennent; et toutesfoiz bien soit de toy notté en toutes pars quieulx choses je condampne et quelles non.⁵⁵

53. *Debating*, 136. Christine uses the term "sexe" to refer to Col's attacks on her. In this article, I use the term "gender" to refer to Christine's expression of her interface with the sex/gender binary. It is her performance of masculinity and violation of feminine norms that are being questioned, not her biological sex. Christine would not have made that distinction between sex and gender, one that remains difficult even in the modern French language because of the double meaning of the word "genre."

54. McWebb's translation includes the reference to her feminine sex in the next sentence. I have replaced it in its original position.

55. *Ibid.*

(Do not let your own willfulness blunt the cleverness of your mind! Look straight down the path of holy theology and you will not condemn my writings thus. Instead you will judge whether praise is truly appropriate for those parts of the *Roman* which my writings address. In any case, it would be good of you to note precisely which parts I condemn and which ones I do not.)

She continues to force the issue of what his actual problem is—her writings or her “sexe,” or, perhaps, “the content of her writings” versus “the mere fact of her writing.” She calls him out for attacking her “veritable opinion justement meue pour tant se elle n’est a ta plaisance” (my truthful opinion simply because it is not to your liking).⁵⁶ Taking a prophetic page from how to play “Bully Bingo,” Christine sees Col’s claims to Truth as what they are: him pretending “to have a pure objective perspective” wherein “anyone who disagrees with them is biased” or wrong (see #2 and #48). However, it must be noted that Col is not necessarily claiming neutrality but superiority. His claim is to an authority that Christine can never access, ostensibly based on the *auctoritas* of the Bible and the biblical *maistre* Jean de Meun, but actually based on Col’s and Christine’s respective genders.⁵⁷

She continues to deconstruct his attacks when she writes, “Si ne cuides aucunement moy estre meue ne desmeue par legiereté, par quoy soye tost desdite” (If you think I am just motivated by fickleness, why are you so annoyed?).⁵⁸ By engaging in this dialogue with Christine and becoming angry, Col has paradoxically revealed that her ideas do have merit and that she is worthy of respect. If she was just a “femme pacionnée” whose “folie ou demence” drove her to write such ignorant words, Col would not be driven to respond, and his response would not evidence his anger and fear.

Throughout her response, Christine is clear that she wishes to have her ideas be the subject of the debate, not her identity. However, both

56. Ibid.

57. In this same passage, Christine posits that Col’s understanding of the Bible is obscured by his emotions—a quite pointed critique on her part.

58. Ibid., 138.

here and in her 1405 *Book of the City of Ladies*, she demonstrates that she is well aware that she cannot expect that or rely on her own intelligence and learning to win any argument. For example, in her letter to Col, in order to bolster her argument, she refers to “un subtil clerc docteur” (a learned cleric) who agrees with her.⁵⁹ Her careful negotiation of the intersection of her gender with her learning is apparent in many parts of her body of work. As bell hooks will argue in her 1984 book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Christine’s self-awareness speaks to her location on the margins of society, a location that conversely provides her with a more nuanced understanding of how that society works.⁶⁰ Col cannot be expected to interrogate a privilege that he sees as natural or God-given or “voir.” Christine, however, who lacks that socially constructed gender privilege, can interrogate it as she gains the skills the scholarly class has (education) but cannot access the concomitant privilege that is actually unearned because it is a result of gender-based privilege.

Moreover, she demonstrates an understanding of the flawed arguments of these men who rely on unearned male privilege to assume authority and to attempt to claim *auctoritas*. She writes in the first section of *The Book of the City of Ladies*:

Mais la veue d’icelluy dit livre, tout soit il de nulle autorité, ot engendré en moy nouvelle penssee qui fist naistre en mon couraige grant admiracion, penssant quelle puet estre la cause, ne dont ce puet venir, que tant de divers hommes, clerks et autres, ont esté, et sont, sy enclins a dire de bouche et en leur traittiez et escrips tant de diableries et de vituperes de femmes et de leurs condicions. En nom mie seulement un ou deux ne cestuy Matheolus, qui entre les livres n’a aucune reputacion et qui traite en maniere de trufferie* maie generaument aucques en tous traittiez philosophes, pouttes, tous orateurs desquelz les noms seroit longue chose, semble que tous parlent par une meismes bouche et tous accordent une

59. Ibid., 136. She also references this unnamed cleric in her treatise to Jean de Montreuil as “l’especial clerc subtil,” 118.

60. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1984).

semblable conclusion, determinant les meurs feminins enclins et plains de tous les vices.⁶¹

(But the sight of this book, although it was of no authority, made me think along new lines which made me wonder about the reasons why so many different men, learned and nonlearned, have been and are so ready to say and write in their treatises so many evil and reproachful things about women and their behavior. And not just one or two, and not just this Matheolus, who has no particular reputation and writes in a mocking manner, but more generally it seems that in all treatises philosophers, poets, and orators, whose names it would take too long to enumerate, all speak with the same mouth and all arrive at the same conclusion: that women's ways are inclined to and full of all possible vices.)⁶²

Here Christine is calling out men like Jean de Meun and Gontier Col, and many, many others who are considered *auctores*, by noting that their arguments are no different from those of “nulle auctorité” like the little book of Matheolus. *Le Roman de la rose* is not the work of a learned master, but just the repetition of a long history of misogyny deployed to maintain male privilege. The arguments of de Meun and Col are no different from those of Matheolus, and no different from those of twenty-first-century gendertrolls, no matter how much biblical *auctoritas* Col hides behind.

Christine positions herself as coming from a place of traditional *auctoritas*—learned reading of those who came before her—but demonstrates that that reading takes her to new ways of thinking (bell hook's argument—that her marginalized gender provides additional *auctoritas* rather than diminishing it). I believe that much more can be said about how Christine confronts male privilege and the authority it confers and then moves on to construct a woman-centered form of *auctoritas*

61. Christine de Pizan, *The 'Livre de la cite des dames' of Christine de Pizan: a Critical Edition*, ed. Maureen Cheney Curnow (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975), 617–18.

62. Translation by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kevin Brownlee from *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*. (New York, NY: Norton, 1997), 119.

through her curation of the letters of the debate which she herself compiles and organizes to present to the French Queen Isabeau of Bavaria and then in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Col's reliance on an unquestioned *auctoritas* of learned men (*cleres*) whose ideas do not differ from unlearned men (*autres*) leads away from the actual truth Christine offers the Queen of France in her prefatory letter ("comme de verité meue," [motivated by the truth]).⁶³ Part of the truth that Christine offers is to shed light on the coercive, constructed nature of patriarchy that relies on its "cleres and autres" to diminish women "qui n'est chose loisible a souffrir ne soustenir" (which is a thing not to be tolerated or sustained).⁶⁴ Christine recognizes that Col's purpose, like that of Matheolus and like gender trolls today, is to maintain male privilege and the authority to control public discourse and spaces.

Ultimately, that is why Col refuses to engage with Christine's arguments. He is attempting to sustain his privilege, to use Christine's word. In order to do so, he employs tactics that parallel those used today by mansplainers, trolls, and bullies. The realization of these similarities has not disheartened me in the face of millennia of misogyny. Rather, it has provided me with an increased understanding of the coercive nature of patriarchy: if patriarchy was inevitable, it would not have to rely on violence to maintain itself. In addition, reading Col's tactics and Christine's responses through the lens of twenty-first-century online feminist interventions has given me another way to connect students with these texts by helping them see that, by refusing to be silenced, we can dismantle patriarchal institutions and spaces, stone by stone, to use Christine de Pizan's metaphor in *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

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63. *Debating*, 110.

64. *Ibid.*