



Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

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Gender, Science, and the Natural World:
Essays on Medieval Literature
from the 2020 Gender and
Medieval Studies Conference



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and lessen women. But, as Crocker writes, “when men write female characters, new forms of heroism emerge from the challenges these female characters face. That most men share something with these female characters—namely, their precarity—should prompt us to rethink what counts as virtue, and how ethical action transpires” (267–68). This line of thought makes Crocker’s achievement seem modest—to a certain sort of reader, she has *merely* discovered a set of tropes that the authors of narratives about women tend to use. However, what this book’s ambition offers is a true revolution in thought, based on re-imagining what constitutes ethical action.

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Christine de Pizan, “*The God of Love’s Letter*” and “*The Tale of the Rose*,” edited and translated by Thelma S. Fenster and Christine Reno. *The Other Voices in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series*, 79. New York and Toronto: Iter Press, 2021. Pp. 209. ISBN: 9781649590060, 9781649590077.

With this superb new Middle French edition and facing-page English translation of two late medieval verse narratives, Christine de Pizan makes another appearance in the prestigious “Other Voices in Early Modern Europe” series. These two poems were previously translated by Fenster for a 1990 Brill edition, now out of print, that also included translations by Mary Carpenter Epler of Hoccleve’s “Letter of Cupid” and Sewell’s “Proclamation of Cupid.” In this new edition by Thelma Fenster and Christine Reno, Christine’s poems are freshly translated into unrhymed verse; the translations are engaging and clear, conveying both Christine’s light touch and her serious engagement with neo-Aristotelian theory and Christian doctrine on female nature. (The earlier translations are not to be faulted, however; comparison of selected passages suggests that both translations convey Christine’s thinking with clarity and wit.) The poems’ new edition works with all extant manuscripts of the poems—four for the *Epistre* and two for the *Dit*. Christine’s revisions (thought to be in her hand or under her direction) suggest that she was actively engaged in the poems’ production over the years.

The chief feature of the new edition is that the critical apparatus has been substantially enhanced; it incorporates a plethora of new scholarship about Christine de Pizan, the *Romance of the Rose*, and medieval writings about gender and women that has been produced in the past thirty years. The earlier translation of the *Epistre* has 51 footnotes in the Introduction; this one has 160, more than three times as many, as well as a substantial bibliography of works by and editions and translations of Christine; primary medieval sources, and important critical studies of these two poems and of Christine's work at large. The new introductory essay is an *état présent* on studies of Christine's defense of women, not only in the *Epistre* and the *Dit*, but throughout her *oeuvre*, from her early lyric poetry to her later moral treatises. By exploring Christine's use of the terms "inclinacion," "condicion," and "meurs" in the *Epistre* and her later works, Fenster and Reno examine Christine's significant exploration of virtue ethics and gender throughout her life. To complement and contrast with Christine's more progressive views on women, the editors include a prose translation by Thomas O'Donnell from Latin of Jean Gerson's "A Poem on Man and Woman."

The line notes to each poem are also more substantial, offering more details on names and events, referring more often to critical insights (many published after 1990), and referring more frequently to similar passages in contemporary literature and in Christine's later writings. There are useful, expanded sections on Manuscripts and Versification.

As a result of these enhancements, this volume places the *Epistre au Dieu D'Amours* and the *Dit de la Rose* squarely in the trajectory of Christine's most important philosophical and didactic works, among them the *Cité des dames* and the *Livre des Trois Vertus*. As the editors note, these two poems represent Christine's "first public challenge to misogynist discourse and to the slighting behavior men could practice before women" (3). The *God of Love's Letter*, as the editors claim, "marks the opening chapter of her lifelong intellectual and personal preoccupations, persistently argued in the philosophical vocabulary that the *Epistre* introduces" (3).

In *The God of Love's Letter*, written in 1399, two years before the beginning of the *Debate*, Christine rehearses her own complaints about men's deceptive behavior and speech through the (male) voice of the God of Love, as he defends women who have been abused and slandered. We can hear Christine's outrage in the disdainful, angry voice of the fictional God, who takes the liberty of lashing out perhaps more forcefully at men's villainy than Christine, as a "sweet and peaceful" woman, was then ready to do. The God of Love mocks knights who

boast of their amorous exploits, even though they may not have been successful; old men whose impotence only increases their vengeful misogyny; men who gossip viciously about virtuous women; and men who blame all women for the faults apparent in a few. The God of Love speaks for Christine (or rather Christine speaks through him) when he attacks clerical misogyny, as evidenced by the *Romance of the Rose* and the works of Ovid; when he questions neo-Aristotelian conceptions about female incapacity, and when he exposes the misuse of Church doctrine to cast women as morally inferior. Fenster and Reno meticulously point us to similar arguments that Christine and others have made previously as well as to rhetorical strains that will resound and echo in future works.

In the *Tale of the Rose*, written in 1402 in the midst of the *Rose* Debate, the speaker is Christine the poet, who tells about a sumptuous dinner at the home of the Duke of Orléans where Lady Loyalty, a goddess, descends to present a commandment from the God of Love himself. Let an order be formed by women consisting of those who truly honor women; “*You will uphold the honor of ladies*” (p. 135, lines 160, 168, 176). Appearing throughout these two works are clever vignettes that attest to Christine’s close observation of courtly society; there are also more serious critiques that demonstrate the poet’s familiarity with moral philosophy and theological arguments.

To sum up, this meticulously prepared volume will be of use to students pursuing projects in French literature, medieval history, and women’s studies, as well as to scholars who seek to expand their knowledge of Christine de Pizan’s defense of women. Its weighty scholarly apparatus is perhaps beyond the reach of beginning undergraduate students, but more advanced students and scholars will benefit from the excellent introduction and line notes.

This translation is an important addition to the corpus of Christine de Pizan’s edited works and to critical studies on Christine. A good translation such as this one, with useful explanation, insightful references, and thoughtful commentary, constitutes a serious critical engagement with the text. Future work on Christine de Pizan’s views on women should now begin with the arguments she advances and the rhetorical strategies she stages in the *God of Love’s Letter* and the *Tale of the Rose*, as Thelma Fenster and Christine Reno have so convincingly demonstrated.

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