SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF FEMININITY: REPRESENTATION VS. MISREPRESENTATION IN CHRISTINE DE PIZAN'S "CITÉ DES DAMES" *(1405)*

Maria Yvonne BĂNCILĂ*

Abstract: *The present paper dwells on the stylistics of Christine de Pizan proto-feminist discourse in her notorious* "City of Ladies"*: throughout the book, de Pizan consistently employs a literary strategy intended to oppose the entrenched, deeply negative, denigratory mis-representations of femininity, instituted by the traditional discourse predicated on male domination and exclusion, to outstandingly positive ones, thus presenting the reader with a "black vs. white" portrait of the woman, by which the "black" – or rather "blackened" – misogynistic view is countered by an utterly luminous representation of the feminine figures that inhabit and allegorically constitute the very building blocks of her city. She thus provides her readership with a highly suggestive opposition between the brilliance of virtuous women and the dark, unfair image she attempts to debunk.*

Keywords*: self-perception of femininity, (mis) representations of femininity, stylistics of literary discourse, denigratory vs. encomiastic portrayal of women, translation into black vs. white symbolism, women defamed vs. women defended.*

With its allegorical edifice – where female paragons of virtues constitute not only an exemplary population, but the actual building blocks of an ideal city entirely made of, and inhabited by outstanding women – Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1405) lends itself to a multitude of interpretations. Possible strands of investigation may approach it from the standpoint of cultural representations of the city, or as an extremely interesting instance illustrating the intersecting of gender, (inner) space and architecture, with the inherent connotations of female symbolism – receptacle/womb, nurturing space, shelter, etc. – articulated through the theme of the city. A particularly productive, and intensely exploited, line of research has saluted this "courageous and erudite apology of feminine virtues" as "the first feminist utopia of universal literature"[1]: a piece of work announcing the feminist stance, as it were, by denouncing medieval misogyny. The terminological choice might be seen as problematic, and some commentators are keen to avoid identifying Christine de Pizan as a feminist[2]: on the other hand, this designation can be perceived as perfectly legitimate since the feminist *stance* is not necessarily confined to the modern era but rather is a distinctive type of attitude distinguished by salient features. Moreover, any reading of a text naturally tends to be informed by subsequent cultural acquisitions[3], and

* University of Bucharest, mariabancila@yahoo.com

[1] Christine de PIZAN, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor* (Reghina DASCĂL trad.), Bucharest, Polirom, 2015, back cover.

[2] R. Dascăl signals the anachronism, quoting Febvre's opinion that anachronism constitutes *le péché des péchés, entre tous irrémissible*: she points out that the term acquired its current significance and entered dictionaries only in the 19th century („Studiu introductiv", in Christine de PIZAN, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor...,* p. 26).

[3] The same commentator also notes that "during the last decades, feminist research has greatly contributed to demonstrating the coherence, continuity and consistency of an old "feminist"

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arguably the tenets of second-wave feminism apply in retrospect to Christine de Pizan's work, thus qualifying her as a feminist *avant la lettre* or a proto-feminist, while the term can easily be employed for the convenience of study. Whether one adheres to this terminological choice or not, it is a fact that Christine de Pizan was acutely sensitive to the perception of women and femininity, contended with the stereotypes of gender and confronted the negative male attitudes. De Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* is thought to be the first feminist (or feminist-stanced) text written by a Western woman. She invites a rethinking of the feminine – as it was misperceived in her times – and protests against labels used derogatively, denying women one of the fundamental properties of human beings, that is, the capacity to control their own impulses and behavior and describing them as persons equipped with marginal intelligence. Christine de Pizan joined a discussion going on already, with strong criticism levelled against women from the part of writers such as Jean de Meun and occasionally some appreciation shown to them from the part of others, such as Boccaccio[1].

> *La querelle des femmes*, as a literary convention, had existed long before Christine's times; however before her, this polemics concerning the virtues, but especially the countless flaws and deficiencies of women, had only men on either side. Christine joined this polemic tradition with great confidence and extraordinary vehemence, irreversibly changing the contents and form of the debate[2].

The present paper does not aim to undertake any partisan defence of one opinion or the other regarding feminist terminology; rather, it treads safer grounds by narrowing the discussion and focusing on the particular stylistic device chosen by the author. It is worth directing our attention towards the *stylistics* of Christine de Pizan's discourse, opposing the various aspects of feminine virtues to the negative image of the woman, held by men and evocative of a photographic negative that converts white into black. Throughout her notorious *City of Ladies*[3], Christine de Pizan consistently employs a literary strategy intended to oppose the entrenched, deeply negative, denigratory mis-representations of femininity, instituted by the traditional discourse predicated on male domination and exclusion, to outstandingly positive ones, thus presenting the reader with a "black vs. white" portrait of the woman, by which the "black" – or rather "blackened" – misogynistic view is countered by an utterly luminous

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tradition, which we call *protofeminism* or *early feminism*, a tradition of female authors reflecting on the condition of the woman" („Studiu introductiv"..., p. 25, translation mine).

[1] For the *Book of the City of Ladies* her main source was Boccaccio's biographical treatise on ancient famous women *De mulieribus claris* (*On Famous Women*), possibly in the French version, *Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes*.

[2] R. DASCĂL, „Studiu introductiv"..., p. 25 (translation mine).

[3] The *Book of the City of Ladies,* 1405, is probably the best known among a vast and highly diverse corpus of works, produced by Christine de Pizan during a literary career spanning her widowhood (Christine lost her husband when she was only 25) until her retirement to a convent: 15 books, whose writing filled 70 *cahiers,* returned to prominence in late 20th century by scholarly research. They include both verse (ballads, rondeaux, lays) and prose, theorizing on political philosophy, courtly love, didactics, providing a biography of king Charles V of France, a story of her own life, and most notably her writings championing the cause of women. De Pisan was the first woman in France, and possibly Europe, to earn her living exclusively by writing. Thus her theoretical stance, advocating for women's equality, finds support in her way of life.

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representation of the feminine figures that inhabit and allegorically constitute the very building blocks of her city. She thus provides her readership with a highly suggestive opposition between the brilliance of virtuous women and the dark, unfair image she attempts to debunk.

The book opens with Christine's reaction to Matheolus' scathingly mysoginistic *Lamentations (Liber Lamentationem)*, a 13th-century piece of medieval literature on marriage (containing men's sexed protest against it)[1]. Based on his own experience of married life, this author complains that women in general make all men's lives miserable. Christine de Pizan's reaction to the book is presented obliquely: she claims to be at first convinced by the arguments against women. On reading the text, we learn that a troubled and upset Christine feels ashamed to be a woman: "This thought inspired such a great sense of disgust and sadness in me that I began to despise myself and the whole of my sex as an aberration in nature"[2]. The three lady Virtues then appear to Christine: in keeping with the conventions of allegorical genre, the author introduces personifications (Lady Reason, Lady Justice and Lady Rectitude) who help her see the unjustness of men's accusations, so prejudiced that they are tantamount to slander.

Interestingly, the Virtue Ladies embody qualities such as the force of intellect, or discernment and justice, generally perceived as masculine attributes; etymologically the term *virtue* designates manliness, the qualities characteristic of a man (*vir*): courage, strength, honor, and by extension excellence or worth. However, in keeping with the age-old ancient and medieval tradition, they are represented by female figures, which in the context can only reinforce the point so convincingly made by Christine de Pizan.

Rather than constructing her text in defense of women as a monologue, by which her musings would reveal the true female qualities, Christine opts for the dialogue between her literary persona (her famous *Je, Christine* that is reiterated throughout the book: "Then I, Christine, asked…") and each of the Lady Virtues. *The first-person narrative voice places the author in the position of a speaker and gives the text the appearance of a perlocutionary act.* That part of the author's self (*je, Christine)* which has apparently internalized the accusations against women, is opposed to *her rational self, able to do justice to her sex, dissimulated under the guise of her interlocutors the Lady Virtues* – sometimes we are most truly ourselves when we are wearing masks – and thus *gives the female readership a sense of immediacy and unmediated relation to their author in both hypostases, illustrating the different stages of selfhood within the same individual. Having assumed her formal identity through her self-referential je, the author continues her discourse in the form of a relentless dialogue between the first-person and third-person voices: actually, this renders in allegorical form the soliloquy of the author in dialogue with herself, mobilizing the opposite voices within – voices that belong to the same soul, in a dramatic dialogue resulting from the inner tension between the conflicting representations of femininity. In framing this dialogic soliloquy, she is able to negotiate points of controversy and contradiction regarding the status and perception of women.*

[1] Actually, *The Book of the City of Ladies* is also an indirect answer to Jean de Meun, famous for his continuation (lines 4089–21780) of Guillaume de Lorris' poem *The Romance of the Rose.* De Meun's addition, dated between 1268 and 1285, is satirical, focusing on the vices of women rather than courtly love. De Pizan had directly criticized this portrayal of women in her *The Tale of the Rose* (1402) and *Letters on the Debate of the Romance of the Rose* (1403).
[2] C. de PIZAN, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor...*, p. 93.

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The three Virtues find Christine lost in painful thoughts, with tears in her eyes, lowering her head in utter humiliation, because of her condition as a woman:

> I could scarcely find a moral work by any author which didn't devote some chapter or paragraph to attacking the female sex. Therefore I had to accept such unfavorable 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[1].

The Virtues, however, have come not only to comfort her but to assert the worth and dignity of women. And they do so by answering Christine's questions about men defaming and maligning women, and by countering each misogynistic opinion with examples of remarkable ladies that disprove it and appear as models of womanhood. As the examples she provides are exceptional feminine figures of all times, de Pizan addresses not only the sexism and misogyny of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe, but (mis)representations of women reaching back to Antiquity. The book includes figures of warriors, scholars, wives and daughters, prophets and saints, to be found in history, mythology, literature – especially religious literature (the Bible and Lives of women saints) – intended to offer a comprehensive and multifaceted representation of femininity. There are countless tales of exceptional women's lives or deeds, providing an endless stream of apparently disjointed accounts that are actually connected by a common thread: the argument is consistently constructed around a series of antitheses – women defamed vs. women defended. Whereas men accuse women of weakness, cowardice, debauchery, being sinful by nature, possessing an unrestrainable sexuality, vain, inconstant, deceitful, more liable to temptation, in order to provide the rationale for woman's subjection to man, each Virtue in turn provides the example of women's excellence, moral strength, valor, contributions to the social and cultural life, resulting in a catalogue of female positive attributes. The dialogue opposes the feminine qualities to the alleged flaws unjustly ascribed to them, as a *strategy of empowerment by subverting binary oppositions, and mining the field of commonly-accepted medieval ideas and social practices.*

This stylistic device, constructed around binary oppositions – good vs. evil, worthy vs. worthless, so heavily marked that the woman becomes *the other* – can figuratively translate this perceived alterity into the realm of chromatic symbolism, opposing black to white. To disparage women is to denigrate them – literally, to blacken their reputation, to cast aspersions on their character, or to belittle their worth. As Pastoureau pointed out, black has deprecatory connotations: Latin terms such as *ater* or *niger* have generated the adjective *atrocious*, or the verb *to denigrate*. In contrast, white has symbolic, social and especially religious significance (and Christine de Pizan's epoch was highly religious):

> Black is the color of evildoers and the impious, the color of divine malediction. It is also the color of primordial chaos, dangerous, harmful night, and especially death. Light alone is the source of life and manifestation of the presence of God. It is opposed to the darkness (…) always associated with evil, impiety, punishment, error, and suffering[2].

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[1] C. de PIZAN, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
[2] Michel PASTOUREAU, *Black. The History of a Color, (Jody Gadding trad.), Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 30.*

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The male authors whose writings so strongly affect Christine contemptuously describe women: "tant abominable ouvrage qui est vaissel, au dit d'iceulx, si comme le retrait et heberge de tous maulx et de tous vices"[1] – mean-spirited denigration that depicts woman as an abominable creature, the iredeemable repository of all vices and evils. This is the dark image placed in contrast to the bright one provided by the Virtues.

Each of them (Reason, Rectitude, Justice) helps Christine build the titular City of Ladies. It is not only inhabited, but actually made of morally and intellectually strong women and thus – according to the image of a city surrounded by walls – it is a stronghold, a defense and refuge against sexist attacks. The construction works start from the very ground on which it will be erected, that is, the way Christine thinks (the self-perception of women). Lady Reason is the first: by answering Christine's questions about the unfair slandering of women, she helps her build the external walls of the city, having first prepared the ground on the Field of Letters (she is to build her case by writing). She urges Christine to take the spade of her intelligence and dig deep to make a trench all around the city. Reason will "carry away the hods of earth on her shoulders"[2], indicating in allegorical language that by means of reason, Christine will become aware of the merits of women and will discard the wrong beliefs she used to hold, by appropriating the negative thoughts of male writers. Reason quotes the excellent qualities of many female personalities, including the Queen of Sheba, Semiramis, the Amazons, Sappho, Minerva, Ceres, Isis, Dido and other figures of the ancient times and mythology: political rulers and military leaders, as well as learned women and scholars. They form the foundation and the defense walls of the city.

In Part II, Lady Rectitude assists Christine in constructing (with the mortar of words) the houses and buildings within the walls of the City of Ladies, and populating it with inhabitants who are "valiant ladies of great renown". Such ladies are protagonists of "stories of pagan, Hebrew, and Christian ladies"[3] (the Erithrean Sibyl, the Cumaean Sibyl, biblical figures: Elizabeth, Anna the Prophetess, Cassandra, Theodora wife of Emperor Justinian I, Agrippina the Elder, Julia daughter of Julius Caesar, Xanthippe), all endowed with great gifts and moral qualities: the gift of prophecy, chastity, faithfulness, loyalty, moral excellence, honesty. Lady Rectitude also discusses the institution of marriage, addressing men's misconceptions and disproving them with examples of dedicated wives and mothers, women paragons of virtue, who loved their husbands and acted honorably. These accounts refute allegations that women are mean, unchaste, unfaithful, and fickle by their nature. Those women who are indeed evil toward their husbands, mentions Lady Rectitude, are exceptions and go against their nature. Rectitude also argues that women deserve the same access to education as men.

Part III has Lady Justice join Christine and complete the edifice; she adds towers and roofs, doorways and gates to the City of Ladies, also enthroning a queen (the Holy Virgin Mary) to rule the city. This section dwells on the examples of female saints who pursued their religious devotion and martyrs, who underwent physical torture while their spiritual selves could never be broken. Such examples include Mary Magdalene, Saint Catherine, Saint Margaret, Saint Lucy, Blessed Martina, Saint Justine, female saints who were forced to watch their children being martyred, Saint Marina the virgin, Blessed Euphrosyna, Blessed Anastasia, Blessed Theodota, the myrrh-bearing women

[1] C. de PIZAN, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor....*, p. 91.
[2] C. de PIZAN, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
[3] C. de PIZAN, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

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and women disciples to the Apostles, obviously culminating with the unsurpassed qualities of the Holy Virgin, who is absolutely beyond compare, light without shadows.

All these exemplary figures testify to feminine value in physical, intellectual, and moral terms. The number of examples, biographies and stories provided by the author is impressive, almost overwhelming. Umberto Eco has investigated[1] cataloguing as a literary device, by which an apparently endless list enables an author to suggest what he terms the *topos of the inexpressible*, meaning a multitude that cannot be estimated or exhausted; thus Christine de Pizan instills in her readers the awareness of the feminine merits, so numerous that they require an enormous number of accounts illustrating them and creating the impression of an endless catalogue.

Christine de Pizan bases her discoursive definition of female identity on the characteristic manner of thinking of her times, with society structured according to a rigorous hierarchy informed by religious belief; accordingly, she places in ascending order, on the successive levels of her allegorical edifice, the figures of praiseworthy women from Antiquity to her own times, culminating with the Holy Virgin as queen of all and ultimate epitome of luminous femininity. Indeed, Christine de Pizan painstakingly lays, like a true mason, row after row of "building blocks" – each of them a paragon of righteousness, integrity, morality. The three parts constitute a progression: from women able to rule wisely, whose accomplishments in the political and military realms equalled or exceeded the merits of men, disproving the misconception of the helplessness and dependency of women; to learned women renowned for their intellectual capacities; to women of vision and prophecy; to epitomes of chastity, honesty, generosity, integrity; to women saints whose spiritual selves could never be destroyed despite abuse and torture; to the highest of all – the Holy Virgin, patron of the City, the brilliance of these figures grows by degrees. As her construction work progresses, as she moves from Antiquity towards Christian times, the character of her illustrious "building blocks" and inhabitants of the city becomes increasingly brilliant. This is only logical, since Christian faith is a path to the illumination; the highest examples provided, the female saints, are not merely brilliant due to their qualities, but actually surrounded by the nimbus of sacred light.

> In the New Testament, the theophanic aspect of light becomes ubiquitous; Christ is the light of the world. White, the color of Christ and light, is also the color of glory and resurrection; in contrast, black appears as the color of Satan, sin, and death[2].

The Virtues themselves, as embodiments of female eminence, are radiant and stand in stark contrast to the metaphoric obscurity that originally surrounds Christine: in her distress caused by the negative perception of women, Christine finds herself "in a dark place" where their light suddenly appears before her and symbolically makes her lift her head. So she beholds the three resplendent, crowned Ladies who project their light upon her and gradually change her dark mood into a newly-gained awareness of women's true, luminous character which they actually stand for: "et je, qui en lieu obscur estoye… dreçant la teste pour regarder dont tel lueure venoit, vy devant moy trois dames couronnees, de tres souveraine reverence, desquelles la resplandeur de leurs cleres faces enluminoit moy meismes et toute la place"[3]. The light bestowed on her by

[1] Umberto Eco, *Vertigo. Lista infinită* (Oana Sălișteanu, trad.), București, RAO, 2009.
[2] M. PASTOUREAU, *Black…, p.* 30.
[3] C. de PIZAN, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor...*, p. 94.

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the Virtues equates knowledge and understanding, and makes her shine as well, once the true character of femininity is revealed. The obscurity of the place that is dissipated by light stands for both the intellectual and moral blindness of the disparagers, and the despondency it brings about to the women they vilify.

Not coincidentally, in the diptych-style miniatures accompanying the various copies of her book[1] (representing the moment when the Three Virtues appear to de Pizan in her study, respectively Christine de Pizan and Lady Reason building the outer wall of the City of Ladies) the City wall is a bright, vibrant white. Not because this is a realistic rendering of marble, the most likely and most appropriate material to be used in building an illustrious edifice, but because its white color denotes goodness and moral value. Interestingly, Reason (that is, her own ability to think for herself) prompts de Pizan to exclude those women whom she terms "des pierres noires", *black stones* unworthy to be employed in the construction of the city, namely those whose behaviour seems to justify the misperception of women in general: "Si gittes hors ses ordes pierres broçonneuses et *noires* de ton ouvrage, car ja ne seront mises ou bel edifice de ta cité"[2]. It is important to note that these not so numerous cases are irrelevant, inessential, as Reason points out. Lady Rectitude, in her turn, bringing to Christine the building blocks, laudable ladies of great dignity ("dames de souveraine dignité"), describes them as beautiful, *shining* stones, which she has prepared for the masonry: "Regardes, amie, les belles reluysans pierres, plus precieuses que autres nulles, que je t'ay acquerries pour aluer en ce maçonnaige"[3]. Christine de Pizan here plays on the dual meaning of the notion of *dignity*: on the one hand it denotes inherent nobility and worth, the quality or state of being worthy of esteem and respect, as well as self-respect; on the other, the honour associated with a high rank or position symbolically translates into references to radiance, luminosity, brilliance, as insignia of a high position in the hierarchy of human value, resorting to transvaluation – a reassessment that repudiates widely accepted, yet unfair standards.

Symbolically, the city is a *locus* of power and authority, that imposes order on the space, especially the inner space. Christine's City reminds of John Bunyan's later City of Mansoul, whose walls can be broken only with the consent of the dwellers within. Similarly, as long as the women refuse to accept the false, damaging testimony of male authors, the distorted image they perpetuate, they cannot be forced to internalize such misconceptions. A new picture of women emerges from the long list of stories: the pattern of the black / white representations, which one may apply to the stylistic device chosen by Christine de Pizan, is here suggestive of a clear choice, that leaves room to no confusion.

Christine ends her book by announcing the completion of the City of Ladies. Her allegorical *edifice* is built by *edifying* the readership on the true qualities of women. She beseeches all women who will join the City in the future to defend and protect it; the very ending emphasizes the resplendence of this great edifice, by a direct reference to the religious imagery of the celestial Jerusalem. Such is the prestige of the City of

[1] „Sandra Hindman has studied five copies of the illustration entitled, *Reason, Rectitude and Justice appear to Christine; Reason helps Christine build the City,* and concludes, "Christine surely supervised the production of these miniatures, instructing her miniaturists either verbally or with written guides that are now lost". Doré Ripley, „Christine de Pizan: An Illuminated Voice", http://www.ripleyonline.com/Under%20Discussion/Christine/Christine.htm

[2] C. de PIZAN, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor...*, p. 120.

[3] C. de PIZAN, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

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Ladies, Christine de Pizan states, that it can be saluted with the words: *Gloriosa dicta sunt de te, civitas Dei!*[1]

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[1] C. de PIZAN, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

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