

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

*The Book of the Mutability
of Fortune*



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Iter Press
Toronto, Ontario

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies
Tempe, Arizona

2017

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Printed in Canada.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

This publication was submitted to the Library of Congress for cataloging. The catalog record was not available at the time of printing.

Cover illustration:

Miniature of Christine in the Marvelous Room of Fortune's castle. From *Le Livre de la mutacion de Fortune*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fonds français 603, 127v, fifteenth century.

Cover design:

Maureen Morin, Information Technology Services, University of Toronto Libraries.

Typesetting:

Becker Associates.

Production:

Iter Press.

Introduction

Christine de Pizan as “Other Voice”

Christine de Pizan stands out as the first professional woman writer in the French literary canon.¹ She presents herself explicitly as such, making her gendered authorial persona that of a carefully crafted “other,” carving out a strong, at times controversial, place in a literary and intellectual landscape historically reserved for men.² She cultivates that persona through autobiographical references woven throughout her works, which persistently and often poignantly emphasize her identity as daughter, mother, wife, and widow.³ Using her singular perspective as a platform from which to stage her writing, Christine’s emphasis on her own gender pairs with an emphasis on women as subject matter. Deftly manipulating the dominant, historically masculine, discursive modes of her day—“courtly” and learned alike—Christine writes within and against them to assert a distinctively feminine voice anchored in a specifically feminine model of authority. As the term for a defined concept of feminism would not exist until the nineteenth century, it would be anachronistic to call Christine a “feminist” in the modern sense. It is quite safe to say, however, that hers is the first self-consciously polemical “proto-feminist” voice we hear from medieval France.

While Christine’s life story and cohesive point of view were imprinted on her writing from the start, the most prominent and decisive moment in her establishment as a credible, authoritative “other” voice was her engagement in France’s first public literary debate, the quarrel surrounding the *Roman de la Rose* (*Romance of the Rose*). This voluminous poem, very well known in Christine’s time, was composed by Guillaume de Lorris (lines 1–4056, ca. 1236) and Jean de Meun (lines 4057–21677, ca. 1270). It depicts a dream vision in which a lover pursues and ultimately ravages his love object, represented by a rose. This work would

1. The scholarly literature on Christine de Pizan is immense. In eleven cases where the documentation pertaining to a topic threatens to overwhelm the footnote apparatus, the reader is invited to refer to the Appendix. In this case, see Appendix/1: *Overviews of Christine’s Life, Works, and Historical Context*.

2. See Appendix/2: *Christine’s Self-Construction as a Gendered Authorial Persona*.

3. Notable examples are to be found in the first twenty poems of her *Cent balades* (*One Hundred Ballads*), the prologue to *Le chemin de longue estude* (*The Path of Long Study*), Book I of the *Mutacion de Fortune* (*Mutability of Fortune*), and Book III of *Lavision-Christine* (*Christine’s Vision*). On Christine as an innovator with regard to autobiography as a genre, see María Angela Holguera Fanega, “Manifestaciones autobiográficas en *Le livre de la mutacion de Fortune* de Christine de Pizan,” in *Las sabias mujeres: Educación, saber y autoría: siglos III–XVII*, ed. María del Mar Graña Cid (Madrid: Al-Mudayna, 1994), 203–11. Regarding autobiography and biography as focal points of Christine’s writing, see James Laidlaw, “Writing Lives—Christine de Pizan,” *New Comparison* 25 (Spring 1998): 25–39.

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leave an indelible mark on French literature for its use of allegory, mythological and other learned references, and narrative structure.

Christine took issue with the *Romance of the Rose*, and in particular its second author, Jean de Meun, for his misogynist tendencies and vulgar language. The result was a public epistolary debate on the poem that unfolded from 1401 through 1402. On one side were Christine and her allies Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, and Guillaume de Tignonville, Provost of Paris. On the other were Jean de Montreuil, provost of Lille and secretary to Charles VI; Gontier Col, also a secretary to the king; and his brother Pierre Col, Canon of Paris. The debate put Christine squarely in the company of a number of “heavy hitters,” whom she likely knew through the circles of secretaries to the royal court that was her personal and professional milieu.⁴ Not only did she hold her own, but she took a measure of control in the dispute by crafting the debate letters into a book at the end of 1401 and presenting them to Queen Isabeau of Bavaria and Guillaume de Tignonville. Ultimately, Christine’s display of knowledge, wielding of a sharp pen, and deft self-promotion went a long way toward solidifying the author’s reputation.⁵

Aside from her status as a professional woman author, Christine can be described as “other” in a number of ways, in that she was often a “first” for her time. She was the first woman among the wave of scholars who brought Italian humanistic thought and literary works to the French intellectual milieu.⁶ With her *Livre de la cité des dames* (*Book of the City of Ladies*), she became the first female writer to pen a substantive text in defense of women, which she accomplished by correctively recasting known texts to show that interpretations in favor of women were as viable as those that had been traditionally opposed to them. Her officially commissioned biography of King Charles V is extraordinary, as not only the first

4. Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea Books, 1984), 47. Henceforth cited as Willard, *Life and Works*.

5. See Appendix/3: *The Debate of the Romance of the Rose*.

6. On Christine’s humanism, see Susan Groag Bell, “Christine de Pizan (1364–1430): Humanism and the Problem of the Studious Woman,” *Feminist Studies* 3 (1976): 173–84; Nadia Margolis, “Culture vantée, culture inventée: Christine, Clamanges et le défi de Pétrarque,” in Eric Hicks, Diego Gonzalez, and Philippe Simon, eds., *Au champ des escriptures: III^e Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan, Lausanne, 18–22 juillet 1998* (Paris: Champion, 2000), 269–308; Margolis, “Christine de Pizan: The Poetess as Historian,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986): 361–75; Earl Jeffrey Richards, “Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson: An Intellectual Friendship,” in John Campbell and Nadia Margolis, eds., *Christine de Pizan 2000: Studies on Christine de Pizan in Honour of Angus J. Kennedy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 197–208; and Richards, “Christine de Pizan, the Conventions of Courtly Diction, and Italian Humanism,” in Richards, Joan Williamson, Nadia Margolis, and Christine Reno, eds., *Re-interpreting Christine de Pizan* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 250–71.

“secular biography” written in France,⁷ but as the first time a woman would be granted such an honor and responsibility—a rarity in any age.

Further, Christine was known to be closely involved in the commercial production of her works, highly unusual for writers in her day, and she even copied some of those texts in her own hand.⁸ Charity Cannon Willard comments in reference to *Lavision-Christine* (*Christine's Vision*) that Christine “became the first woman to leave such an autobiography as a record of her evolution both as a writer and as a person.”⁹ Daniel Poirion goes a step further still, saying that *pour la première fois en France, nous ne pouvons pas séparer l'étude de l'oeuvre et celle de l'écrivain. Voilà, au sens qui deviendra classique, notre premier auteur, et cet auteur est une femme* (for the first time in France, we cannot separate the study of the work from that of the writer. Here is, in what will become the classic sense of the word, our first *author*, and that author is a woman).¹⁰

In sum, then, Christine was not just an “other” voice of the late Middle Ages, but also a forerunner with respect to modern concepts of authorship, in many ways redefining the relationship between writer and text. Christine's contemporary, famed poet Eustache Deschamps, called her “nompaille” (incomparable) in a ballad written for her, with the refrain “seule en tez fais ou royaume de France” (for your achievements, you stand alone in the French kingdom).¹¹ With some two hundred manuscripts of Christine's texts surviving—including the highest number of original manuscripts by any medieval author, many in the author's own hand¹²—she has lived up to that assessment, standing out as perhaps the most “present” of all late medieval French writers, of either gender, in our time.

Christine's Life and Works

While Christine's agenda was clearly a conscious engagement with the cause of women, she was not what we would call radical in her view of social roles. In fact,

7. Willard, *Life and Works*, 118.

8. See Appendix/4: *Christine's Involvement in the Production of Her Works*.

9. Willard, *Life and Works*, 160.

10. Daniel Poirion, “Christine de Pisan,” in *Le Moyen Âge II: 1300–1480* (Paris: Arthaud, 1971), 206.

11. *Œuvres complètes de Eustache Deschamps*, ed. le Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1878–1903), 6:251–52; Ballad 1242, line 2 and refrain.

12. Gilbert Ouy and Christine Reno, “Le catalogue des manuscrits autographes et originaux de Christine de Pisan,” in Bernard Ribémont, ed., *Sur le chemin de longue étude ... Actes du colloque d'Orléans, juillet 1995* (Paris: Champion, 1998), 127.

her “feminism,” or lack thereof, remains a topic of debate to this day.¹³ As Willard wryly put it, “There still remains the problem of judging her as a woman as well as a writer . . . opinion has swung from admiration that she could have accomplished what she did at all to disdain for the fact that she did not do what she never intended.”¹⁴ With respect to politics, morality, and social roles, Christine’s views were very much in line with the dominant thought of her day, particularly that of the conservative world of the court. As a woman head-of-household, earning her living through writing, she was a self-avowed anomaly. She observed more than once that not only was she fulfilling a man’s role, but in fact she had to turn into a man to do so, as she graphically depicts in the most dramatic, explicit, and studied of such references, found in the *Mutability of Fortune*.¹⁵

Christine’s works are striking for their number and variety. She composed love poetry. She wrote epistles addressed to readers real and imaginary, allegorical dream visions, a world history, and a royal biography. She highlighted her faith in religious writings. She shared her knowledge and entertained her tendency toward didacticism through treatises on good governing, chivalry, and proper behavior for women.¹⁶ Her patrons and dedicatees occupied the highest strata of society, and included such luminaries as King Charles VI, Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, John of Berry, Philip the Bold of Burgundy, John the Fearless of Burgundy, and Louis of Orléans. Christine’s impetus to write professionally arose from crisis in her life, and her ability to succeed at such a level was the fortunate result of her studious nature combined with her unusual upbringing—an Italian transplant who never lost her intellectual and emotional connection with her roots, and who

13. For a criticism of Christine’s conservative stance, see Sheila Delany, “‘Mothers to Think Back Through’: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan,” in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 177–97. Christine M. Reno responds to Delany in “Christine de Pizan: At Best a Contradictory Figure?” in Margaret Brabant, ed., *Politics, Gender, and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), 171–91. See also Beatrice Gottlieb, “The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century,” in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mun-dy*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 337–64; and Douglas Kelly, “Reflections on the Role of Christine de Pisan as a Feminist Writer,” *Sub-stance* 2 (1972): 63–71. For an early study of Christine’s “feminism,” see Rose Rigaud, *Les idées féministes de Christine de Pisan* (Neuchâtel: Imprimerie Attinger Frères, 1911).

14. Willard, *Life and Works*, 222–23.

15. *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*, English translation of *La mutacion de Fortune* published in this volume, lines 1325–61.

16. On Christine’s didacticism, see, for example, Roberta Krueger, “Christine’s Anxious Lessons: Gender, Morality, and the Social Order from the *Enseignemens* to the *Avison*,” in Marilyn Desmond, ed., *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 16–40; and Charity Cannon Willard, “Christine de Pizan as Teacher,” *Romance Languages Annual* 3 (1992): 132–36.

was raised amid the people and resources of the French royal circle. From early on, Christine's work was well received in France, and thanks largely to the artistically attuned English noble, the Earl of Salisbury, whom she met at the French court in late 1398, she gained an audience in England as well.¹⁷ Christine was also known in Italy, as a result of marriages between the French and Italian royal families around this time.

Christine was born in Venice in 1364 or 1365, where she stayed until ca. 1369, when her father Thomas (Tommaso di Benvenuto da Pizzano), doctor and astrologer to the court of King Charles V the Wise, relocated his family to Paris.¹⁸ Christine was reared in the milieu of the intellectually-minded king, to whose extensive library she had access. Thanks to her learned father, Christine was exposed to more academic pursuits than most young people of her time, especially girls. Still, in her autobiographical reflections, she lamented that, having been born a girl, she did not receive the depth of education that a boy would have enjoyed, commenting that she was only able to gather the scraps from her father's table. Her writings, nonetheless, show her to have been extremely well read in the canonical texts known to the literati of her day, with the influence of such masters as Boethius, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Dante so prevalent that it is an important current underlying much of the scholarship on Christine and her work.

At age fifteen, Christine married Etienne de Castel, himself employed as a secretary to the king, and all indications are that she led a happy family life, which came to include two sons and a daughter. Christine's world would take a progressive downward turn, however. It began as early as September 1380, when the death of Charles V ushered in both an era of great turmoil for France and an immediate change in the fortunes of Christine's family. Suddenly, the standing and income of Christine's father suffered a precipitous decline, as would his health. After struggling with an illness that would strain his finances, Thomas died between 1384 and 1389, leaving little behind as an inheritance for his daughter.

Christine's troubles, however, were just beginning. Most catastrophic and life changing of all was the loss of her husband to illness in 1390. Now she was on her own, responsible for the well-being of her mother, three children, and a niece. Making matters worse, she was also thrown into the fray of lengthy legal battles to

17. On the dating of that encounter, see James Laidlaw, "Christine de Pizan, the Earl of Salisbury, and Henry IV," *French Studies* 36 (1982): 129–43.

18. For a study of Christine's roots in Italy, see Nikolai Wandruszka, "Familial Traditions of the *de Piçano* at Bologna," in Angus J. Kennedy, Rosalind Brown-Grant, James C. Laidlaw, and Catherine M. Müller, eds., *Contexts and Continuities: Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium on Christine de Pizan, Glasgow 21–27 July 2000: Published in Honour of Liliane Dulac* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002), 3:889–906; and Wandruszka, "The Family Origins of Christine de Pizan: Noble Lineage Between City and 'Contado' in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," in Hicks, Gonzalez, and Simon, *Au champ des escriptures*, 111–30.

settle her estate, gaining firsthand knowledge of the court system's corruption and hostility toward women. Christine's legal wrangling would drag on for more than twenty years, a trying and scary time to which she alludes in several of her texts, including the *Mutability of Fortune*.

It was during this period that Christine's literary enterprise began. Her first collection of poems, the *Cent balades (One Hundred Ballads)*, written between ca. 1394 and 1402, comprises primarily love poems, with the first twenty of particular significance for their autobiographical thrust. These poems depict Christine's recent widowhood and the terrible suffering it caused her. At this stage, Christine writes not just to make a living, but also as a refuge from her grief. Poem 11 of this sequence is the famous "Seulete suy" (A little woman alone am I). Here, Christine defines herself as a widow, with the end of line 1, "et seulete vueil estre" (and a little woman alone I want to be), affirming her resolve.¹⁹

Christine would experiment not only with ballads, but with the range of other fixed forms popular in her day—rondeaux, virelays, and lays. Christine's first long poem is the 827-line *Epistre au dieu d'amours (Letter of the God of Love)*, dating from 1399. The central theme of the *Epistre* is the negative side of romance, addressing as it does men's ill-treatment of women, with an emphasis on seduction, deceit, indiscretion, and slander — all so damaging to a woman's well-being and reputation.

While the initial phase of Christine's work focused on poetry and courtly love themes, even relatively early in her career she would take up weightier topics, seemingly compelled to offer advice where she had areas of concern. An early example is the *Epistre Othea (Letter of Othea)*, written in 1400. Known for its unique structure, combining verse passages with prose allegory and didactic gloss, the *Letter of Othea* draws on mythology for the lessons it contains. This work, focused on good morals and proper behavior for young men, is directed to Christine's teenage son, Jean de Castel. But copies were also given to Louis, Duke of Orléans, Queen Isabeau, Charles VI, and Philip the Bold, suggesting that Christine had

19. *Œuvres poétiques de Christine de Pisan*, ed. Maurice Roy (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1886–1896), 1:12. On this stance taken by Christine, see Lori J. Walters, "The Figure of the *seulette* in the Works of Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson," in Liliane Dulac, Anne Paupert, Christine Reno, and Bernard Ribémont, eds., *Desireuse de plus avant enquerre ... Actes du VIe Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan: Paris, 20–24 juillet 2006: Volume en hommage à James Laidlaw* (Paris: Champion, 2008), 119–39. On isolation as a hallmark of Christine's literary persona, see Catherine Attwood, "The 'I' Transformed: The Poetic 'I' in the Works of Christine de Pizan," Chap. 5 in *Dynamic Dichotomy: The Poetic "I" in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century French Lyric Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 167–74; and Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, "'Seulete suy et seulete vueil estre....,'" in Kennedy et al., *Contexts and Continuities*, 2:549–60.

loftier aims for her text.²⁰ As it turns out, the *Letter of Othea* went on to enjoy the greatest commercial success of any of Christine's texts.

The years 1400–1405 would be a period of dazzling productivity, during which Christine composed the majority of her most substantial and important texts. We have already noted that the *Rose* debate of 1401–1402 represented a validation for Christine, establishing her authority in a new and public way, and galvanizing her place in the wider intellectual community. That event also marked a turning point in Christine's writing, as she began to engage more consistently in weightier topics such as history and governance, and to compose in prose rather than verse. While she did not abandon courtly love themes and poetry entirely, the overall trend as Christine's career unfolded was toward an expansion of her range of concerns and assertion of an ever bolder voice.

A major work dating from this period is *Le chemin de longue estude* (*The Path of Long Study*), inspired by both Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dante's journey to the underworld. Written during 1402–1403, this is the first of Christine's texts in which she publicly expresses her concerns for her country's ills. The poem opens with a lament on the sad state of the world, and especially of France, where conflict is the order of the day. The Prologue is autobiographical, again emphasizing Christine's widowhood and the solace she takes in solitary intellectual pursuits. The poem goes on to recount an allegorical dream vision in which a sibyl guides Christine-the-protagonist on a voyage of discovery through which she visits many exotic lands, and then the heavens. She ends up observing a marvelous tribunal of sorts, where queens Wealth, Wisdom, Chivalry, and Nobility argue before Lady Reason over who is to blame for the sad state of affairs on Earth, and the best way to restore good governance and stability. The views of Christine-the-author are plain: Wisdom wins the argument, persuading Reason that the world needs neither the wealthiest prince nor the greatest warrior, but a philosopher-king, and that France is the rightful place from which to reestablish order. Christine-protagonist is chosen to bring the message about righteous governance and the responsibility of leaders back to France, which Christine-author indeed does by dedicating the work to the king and presenting copies to the dukes of Berry, Burgundy, and Orléans, three of the central figures in France's internal power struggles.

The *Path of Long Study* is contemporaneous with the *Mutability of Fortune* (to be discussed below). It is after that busy year of writing, and the success of the *Mutability of Fortune* in particular, that Christine would be commissioned by Philip of Burgundy to write his brother's biography, *Le livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V* (*The Book of the Deeds and Good Ways of the Wise King Charles V*). It is Christine's first work entirely in prose. More than just the

20. Nadia Margolis, *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 83.

story of the king's life, this is a treatise on kingship itself, with Charles V as the model. Christine extols Charles's virtue and intelligence, and expounds on chivalry and wisdom as qualities that a good king should possess. As Philip of Burgundy died in April 1404, he did not live to see the work's completion in November of that year. However, Christine began the year 1405 by presenting the biography to the king's brother John, Duke of Berry, on New Year's Day.²¹

Two of Christine's most important works would soon follow. In the prose *City of Ladies*, modeled on Boccaccio's *Book of Illustrious Women*, Christine recasts tales from myth, history, legend, and religious writings in a light favorable to women. The divine ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice appear to the naïve Christine-protagonist, confused and saddened by the condemnation of women that was so prevalent in writings of all kinds across the ages. Through examples of women whose accomplishments and character defy the negative judgments, Christine's visitors teach her to read in a new way, to trust in her own feminine experience, and ultimately to counsel and speak on behalf of all women. The metaphorical City of Ladies, of which the building blocks are all the examples that have comprised Christine-protagonist's education, will stand as a bastion in defense of women, with the Virgin Mary herself as queen.²² Exemplifying Christine's pro-women agenda and highlighting her erudition, the *City of Ladies* has gone on to become the most widely read of Christine's works in modern times.

Christine's Vision, also in prose and also dating from 1405, is again structured as an allegorical dream vision. Part 1 is largely concerned with the history of France and its present-day ills, capped off by Christine-protagonist being charged with spreading the word to France's leaders about what must be done to get France back on track. In Part 2, Christine-protagonist moves on to the University of Paris to explore the implications of true wisdom versus opinion in one's understanding of life and the world. Part 3, the best known section of this complex and unusual work, contains the most extensive autobiographical passage in all of Christine's writings, in which she presents herself in terms of her dual status as ever-grieving widow and, by this point in her life, successful professional writer.

One of the last works to emerge from this flurry of activity is the prose *Livre des trois vertus* (*Book of the Three Virtues*), later renamed *Le tresor de la cité des dames* (*The Treasury of the City of Ladies*), composed in 1405–1406. This work, a follow-up to the *City of Ladies*, is a kind of how-to manual for the way women from all walks of life should comport themselves. As Willard points out, this work breaks new ground both by paying attention to women of all social strata and by

21. Willard, *Life and Works*, 132.

22. For a study relating Fortune's castle with this metaphorical city, see Julia Simms Holderness, "Castles in the Air? The Prince as Conceptual Artist," in Karen Green and Constant J. Mews, eds., *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 161–75.