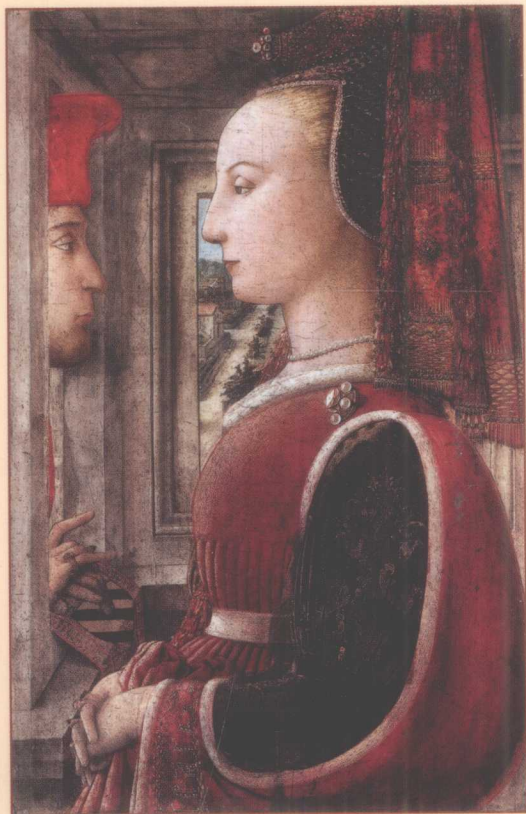


THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF CHRISTINE DE PIZAN



TRANSLATED BY RENATE BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI
AND KEVIN BROWNLEE

EDITED BY RENATE BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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THE SELECTED
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DE PIZAN



NEW TRANSLATIONS
CRITICISM

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Introduction

Christine de Pizan, the first professional woman writer in Europe, was born in Venice around 1364. Her father, Thomas of Pizan, came originally from Pizzano, a small town near Bologna.¹ He was a well-known physician and astrologer whose fame caused him to be appointed to the court of the French king Charles V. He left Italy when Christine was still an infant, and his family followed him in 1368. In her *Vision* of 1405 the adult Christine describes how they arrived in Paris in their elaborate Italian clothes, how welcome everyone made them feel, and how privileged they felt. The fortunes of Christine's family depended on the benevolence of the king who was a patron of the arts and fostered an intense intellectual life at his court.

But as the arts flourished, the political situation became more and more unstable: the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), which pitted England against France over the succession to the French throne, had already taken its toll on the French in the disastrous battle of Crecy (1346).² When Charles V acceded to the throne in 1364, the English were in control of large parts of southwestern France. In addition, through the rivalries between the French nobles a civil war erupted in the first years of the fifteenth century, which marked Christine's life and work for decades.

For a long time Christine's life was like a beautiful voyage, as she described it herself in the *Livre de la mutacion de Fortune* [Book of Fortune's transformation] of 1404. Around 1379 she was married to Etienne de Castel, a notary and secretary at the royal court. Unlike many arranged medieval marriages, this was a love match. In one of her ballads, *Other Ballads* "26," she called marriage a "sweet thing" and described how loving and considerate her husband was on their wedding night. Within a few years she had three children: two sons and a daughter, born between 1381 and 1385. But then disaster struck. King Charles V died in 1380, and his successor Charles VI did not behave as generously toward Christine's family. Both her husband and her father lost much of their pay, and Thomas of Pizan died sometime between 1384 and 1389 without leaving much of an inheritance. But Christine's greatest misfortune was the premature death of her husband in 1389 in an epidemic: she was left an almost destitute widow at twenty-

1. For the most complete treatment of Christine's life, see Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan, Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea, 1984). Although Christine wrote her own name with a z, in the sixteenth century it was changed by various printers into an s, and Christine's father was believed to be from Pisa. Only recently has her name regained the z. (In older criticism one finds her name still spelled with an s.) For details on Christine's works, see the headnotes to each selection in this edition.
2. For a concise history of the Hundred Years' War, see Desmond Seward, *The Hundred Years War. The English in France, 1337–1453* (New York: Atheneum, 1978). Another fundamental work is Edouard Perroy, *The Hundred Years War*, trans. W. B. Wells (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1951).

five with three small children, her mother, and a niece to support.

Forced by circumstances to "become a man," as she puts it in the *Mutation de Fortune*, she began to write and look for patrons. This was an extraordinary step for a woman at this time. Most widows remarried or entered convents, but Christine was determined to support her family by the work of her pen. In this period even male writers did not live exclusively from their writings. Most had appointments at the court or in the Church that would provide them with a regular salary. But Christine, as a woman, could not hope to be appointed to any such positions. Her decision to turn herself into a professional writer was thus extremely unusual and daring.

Learning had always been her great love, though she describes her education several times as "crumbs I gathered from my father's table." Since the universities were closed to women, Christine's instruction depended entirely on her father. In the *Livre de la cité des dames* [Book of the city of ladies] she makes it clear that the intellectual differences between boys and girls are the result not of differing intellects but of the obstacles put into the path of girls' education. While her father furthered her ambitions of learning, her mother considered them unsuitable for a girl, and so her education never reached the level she had hoped for. Nonetheless, her knowledge of the major works of her times was impressive, and she made good use of the many compilations of historical and theological texts available in the royal and ducal libraries.

She began her literary career by writing love poetry, a genre much in demand from her patrons but not her first choice of subject matter, as she makes clear. Yet, she was very good at it, writing in different voices of men and women and constructing already in her first cycle of one hundred ballads sequences of poems that could be put together into a story, something she perfected later with her *Cent ballades d'amant et de dame* [One hundred ballads of a lover and a lady]. There are also many poems of widowhood, a new topic for lyric poetry, where she expresses the sorrow over a lost husband. Modern readers tend to read these poems as her most personal.

Christine also wrote some devotional texts, expressing her deeply held Christian faith. In the *Prières à Notre Dame* [Prayers to our Lady] (1402–03) she addressed the Virgin in prayers for all parts of French society. In the *Sept Psaumes allegorisés* [Seven allegorized Psalms] (1409) she meditated on and interpreted Psalm 102, and in the *Heures de contemplation de la Passion de Notre Seigneur* [Hours of the contemplation of the Passion of our Lord] (ca. 1422) she seeks to comfort the French in their misfortune by recalling Christ's sufferings.³

But Christine's most profound love belonged to the texts she called "more subtle and more useful." Her first nonlyric work was the *Epistre d'Othéa* [Letter from Othea] of 1400, where she invented a goddess of wisdom, Othea, who uses lessons drawn from mythological stories to give advice to

3. Excerpts from these three texts have been translated in Charity Cannon Willard, ed., *The Writings of Christine de Pizan* (New York: Persea, 1993), 318–37 (including an appreciation of Christine's spiritual life). For another spiritual text see the *Epistre de la prison de vie humaine* [Letter on the prison of human life] on p. 248.

the Trojan prince Hector on the chivalric and spiritual life. She dedicated the different copies of this text to several high nobles and thus laid her first claim to a political voice that became more and more urgent as the situation in France deteriorated.⁴ Before her more overtly political texts, Christine composed many lyrical works: love debates and complaints; more ballads and rondels; and the long poem *Dit de la pastoure* [Tale of the shepherdess] (1403), which reexamines the traditional poetic genre of the pastoral from a woman's perspective. An especially well-regarded work is her long narrative poem *Le Livre du duc des vrais amants* [The Book of the duke of true lovers] (1403–05), which combines prose and verse and explores the sentimental life of courtly lovers.⁵

In the first years of the new century (1401–02) Christine became a public player in an intellectual debate on the *Romance of the Rose*, one of the best-known texts of the Middle Ages. Composed by two different authors, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, between 1228 and 1270, it was an allegory of love, depicting the amorous adventures of a young man as the quest for a rose bud. In the much longer second part, Jean de Meun invented various characters, such as the Jealous Husband, who spouted tirades against women.⁶ When one well-known intellectual, Jean de Montreuil (1354–1418), provost of the city of Lille, felt compelled to circulate a little treatise praising the *Romance of the Rose*, Christine reacted violently. Her letters and the texts by her ally Jean Gerson (1363–1429), chancellor of the University of Paris, and by her opponents (in addition to Jean de Montreuil there were the brothers Pierre and Gontier Col) were collected in a dossier that Christine presented to the queen, Isabeau of Bavaria. This debate made Christine known and staked out her position as a defender of women. She had first taken up an explicit pro-woman position in the *Epistre au dieu d'amours* [The god of love's letter] in 1399, which accused men of maligning and mistreating women for no good reason.

In the next few years she wrote an extraordinary fifteen major works (by her own count in the *Vision*), among them four long works that combined allegory with autobiographical and political elements: *Le Livre du chemin de long estude* [The path of long study] (1402–03), the *Livre de la mutacion de Fortune* (1403), and then in a switch from verse to prose *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1404–05), and *Lavision Christine* [Christine's Vision] (1405). She had also been commissioned by the duke of Burgundy, Philip the Bold (1342–1404), to write an official biography of his late brother, Charles V. This was the *Livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V* [The book of the deeds and good conduct of the wise king Charles V] (1404). In those same years she also wrote the *Livre des trois vertus* [Book of the three virtues] (1405–06), a handbook for women's conduct in society, and a treatise on military art, *Le Livre des fais d'armes et de chevalerie* [The

4. On the political context of the *Letter from Othea*, see Sandra L. Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's "Epistre Othéa": Painting and Politics at the Court of Charles VI* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986).

5. See Thelma Fenster, trans. (with lyrics trans. Nadia Margolis), *The Book of the Duke of True Lovers* (New York: Persea, 1991).

6. See Charles Dahlberg, trans., *The Romance of the Rose* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971; rept. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1983).

likely at the abbey of Poissy where her daughter was a nun. Her one son who survived infancy, Jean de Castel, died in 1425.

But toward the end of her life a shining light of hope appeared on the horizon: Joan of Arc. After the death of Charles VI in 1422, the English king Henry VI had become the nominal king of France, despite the presence of Charles VII, officially king of France. It was Joan's mission, inspired by a divine voice, as she stated, to crown Charles VII. This she accomplished on July 17, 1429, and only two weeks later Christine wrote her celebration of Joan's life. The young peasant girl from Domremy embodied everything Christine had prayed for: a woman was given a divine mission to restore peace in France and give the country back to the French. Most likely Christine did not live to see the terrible end of Joan, betrayed by the Burgundians and burned at the stake on May 30, 1431. It would take another two decades to chase the English from French territory.

Christine's reputation did not die with her. In 1440–42 Martin le Franc composed a work in defense of women, *Le Champion des dames* [The Champion of ladies] in which he called her the "valiant Christine" who knew Latin and Greek (she did not know Greek) and whose name would never die. Between 1545 and 1795 there are dozens of references to her,⁷ always as an extraordinary learned woman. Jean de Marconville, for example, in his book on women's good and bad characteristics (1564) praised her to the skies as the wisest woman ever. Johann Eberti, a German scholar, put her into his encyclopedia of more than five hundred learned women in 1706. He singled out her *Livre du chemin de long estude* and the *Livre des trois vertus* as particularly successful.⁸ But not every scholar was an admirer of Christine. Thus for Gustave Lanson, an influential educator in late-nineteenth-century France, she was an unbearable bluestocking whose works were as numerous as they were mediocre.⁹

In our own time Christine de Pizan has been rediscovered mostly as the author of the *City of Ladies*. As more and more of her works are being studied, questions on her "feminism" must be reconsidered. She certainly was the first writer to address the tradition of misogyny prevalent in both the society and the literature of her time from a female perspective. She made herself a champion for women by illustrating their achievements in culture and history and by emphasizing their intellectual equality. She created new bases for a female authority of writing by emphasizing her subjectivity as a learned woman whose affective and intellectual lives could not be separated and found literary expression in her many works. But she never advocated a change in the structures of her society.¹ Given her upbringing and social background, revolutionary ideas had to remain totally foreign to her. She

7. See Glenda McLeod, ed., *The Reception of Christine de Pizan from the Fifteenth through the Nineteenth Centuries: Visitors to the City* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1992), appends. 1–2, 127–32.

8. Jean de Marconville, *De la bonté et mauvaiseté des femmes*, (Paris: Côté femmes, 1991), 60–61. Johann Caspar Eberti, *Eröffnetes Cabinet des gelehrten Frauenzimmers*, ed. Elisabeth Gössmann (Munich: iudicium, 1986), 96–97.

9. Gustave Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris: Hachette, 1909), 167.

1. Two articles reprinted here specifically address the problem of Christine's feminism (see pp. 274 and 312).

did not think much of the common people and would have never wanted to upset the hierarchies that shaped the society of her time. Her dearest wishes were that women should be recognized for their true worth and be treated well, that people should treasure learning, and that France should present a unified front to its long-standing enemy, England. She worked hard for these goals, in a "joyful and voluntary solitude," as she put it, and it is up to us to assess the results.

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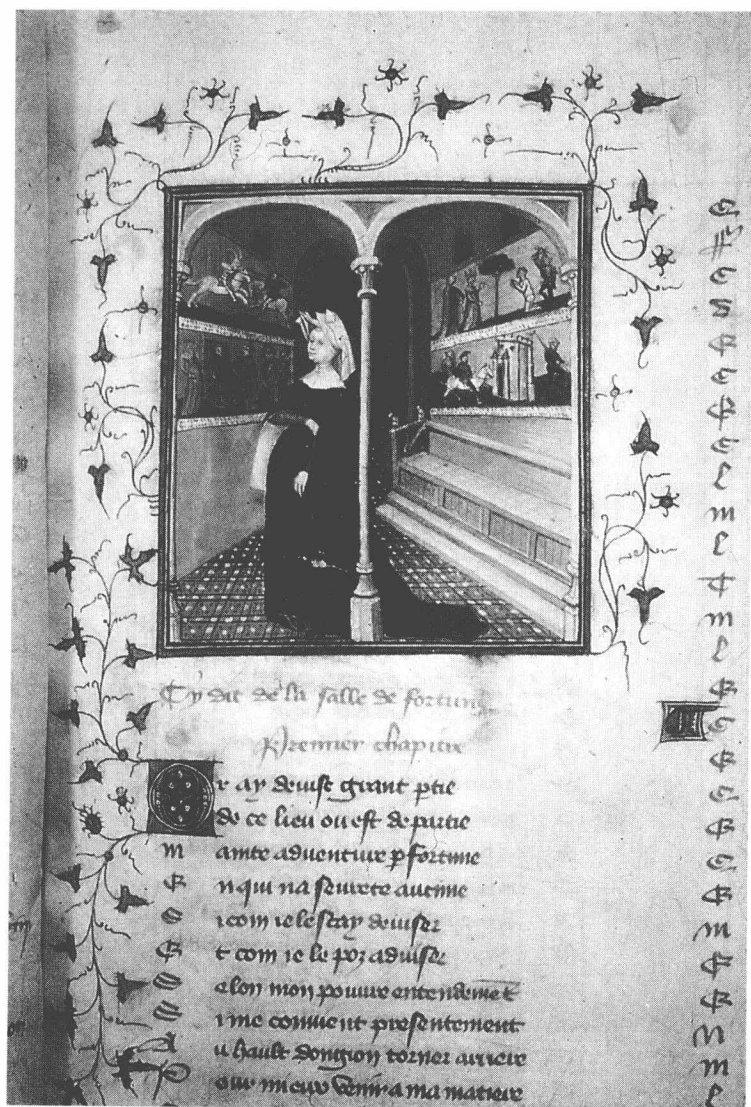
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THE SELECTED WRITINGS
OF CHRISTINE DE PIZAN





This miniature shows Christine working on *The Book of Fortune's Transformation*. Her little dog is at her feet. This manuscript was one of the many presentation copies Christine had prepared for her wealthy patrons. Munich, Staatsbibliothek, gall. II, folio 2.



Christine stands in the vast hall of Fortune's castle and contemplates scenes from ancient history that she then transcribes for her readers. Munich, Staatsbibliothek, gall. II, folio 53.

FROM ONE HUNDRED BALLADS AND OTHER BALLADS

[Between 1393 and 1412 Christine wrote about three hundred ballads, and many shorter poems.¹ The *One Hundred Ballads* were completed before 1402 when Christine assembled her first collected works. She may have been inspired by the admired poet Eustache Deschamps who had also written *One Hundred Ballads* and by another such collection that circulated under the name of Jean le S  n  chal.² Christine created coherent thematic groups within the cycle: poems of widowhood; the development of a love relationship from the point of view of the lady; and another love story where both knight and lady speak, a device that announces her later *One Hundred Ballads of a Lover and a Lady*.³ Some poems deal with mythological topics, give some sort of moral instruction or accuse false lovers; some allude to current events or are addressed to a specific patron. Many of the themes of her later works are thus already present in this first collection.

Interestingly, Christine realizes that some people may misread the love poems and confuse the poetic *I* with Christine herself. She cautions her audience to this effect in ballad "50." Her poems of widowhood, on the other hand, are generally considered to be more autobiographical, perhaps because the love poems often follow an established tradition of love poetry while there were no models for the poems of widowhood.

The formal intricacy of her poems cannot be adequately reproduced in English but was very important to Christine, as she offers a large number of different formal arrangements in her many poems.

Translated by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski from Maurice Roy, ed., *Oeuvres po  tiques de Christine de Pisan*, vol. 1 (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1886).]

From One Hundred Ballads

14

Alone and in great suffering in this
deserted world full of sadness has my
sweet lover left me. He possessed my
heart, in greatest joy, without grief.
Now he is dead; I'm weighed down by

5

1. For details see the introduction to Kenneth Varty, ed., *Christine de Pisan's Ballades, Rondeaux, and Virelais. An Anthology* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1965), xxvii-xxviii. The ballad was originally a dance song, usually consisting of three couplets with the same rhyme and a refrain repeated after each couplet. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the ballad usually had three stanzas, ending with a refrain, and followed by a fourth shorter stanza called the *envoi*, often addressed to a prince or other patron.
2. Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pisan: Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea, 1984), 59.
3. See Charity Cannon Willard, "Lover's Dialogues in Christine de Pisan's Lyric Poetry from the *Cent Ballades* to the *Cent Ballades D'Amant et de Dame*," *Fifteenth Century Studies* 4 (1981), 167-80.

grievous mourning and such sadness has
gripped my heart that I will always weep
for his death.

What can I do? It's not surprising that I
weep and sigh, with my dear lover dead. 10
For when I look deeply into my heart and
see how sweetly and without hardship I
lived from my childhood and first youth
with him, I am assailed by such great
pain that I will always weep for his
death. 15

I'm like a turtle dove without its mate,
who turns away from greenery and heads
toward aridity; or like a lamb the wolf
attempts to kill, which panics when its 20
shepherd leaves it. Thus I am left in
great distress by my lover, which gives
me so much pain that I will always weep
for his death.

17

If all my writings are about sadness,
it's no surprise, for a heart in mourning
cannot have joyous thoughts. Asleep or
awake, every hour finds me in sadness. To
find joy is difficult for a heart that 5
lives in such sadness.

I can never forget this great,
incomparable suffering which brings my
heart to such torment, which puts into my
head such grievous despair, which 10
counsels me to kill myself and break my
heart. To find joy is difficult for a
heart that lives in such sadness.

I cannot write sweet things. Whether I
want to or not, I must complain bitterly
about the evil which I must bemoan. It
makes me tremble like a leaf, this pain
that attacks me. To find joy is difficult
for a heart that lives in such sadness. 15