Katie Bloomer

Professor Gurney

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Gender Roles in Christine de Pizan’s “The Book of the City of Ladies”

Anti-feminist rhetoric has been around for a long time, both in literature and in women’s day-to-day lives. Anti-feminism encompasses a vast range of attitudes – usually stemming from men – which define women as less rational, more emotional, more lustful and more generally prone to sin. Often, women had difficulty arguing against such claims because their voices held little to no authority against their male counterparts. However, during the Middle Ages, a French woman named Christine de Pizan fought against such anti-feminist rhetoric by constructing many feminist works, including “The Book of the City of Ladies.” In her novel, she not only challenged the male literary authorities, but also reeducated female readers into a more feminist mindset.

The novel is developed around the personification of three virtues in the form of divine ladies – Reason, Rectitude and Justice – who helped Christine build the allegorical City of Ladies. Christine asked Reason – the apparent leader of the trio – many questions concerning anti-feminist claims, such as female weakness and incapacity for leadership. Reason spent a large portion of the book retelling stories of feminist figures throughout history and mythology in order to teach Christine how absurd such claims were. However, when Christine asked Reason why women did not hold legal or political positions, Reason seemed to embody the very anti-feminist rhetoric Christine fought against, saying they weren’t meant for such jobs because God “ordained man and woman to serve Him in different offices,” (de Pizan 31). And yet, for the remainder of the book, Reason listed women who were more successful than men in traditionally male jobs.

In this instance, Reason’s narrative seems to contradict her understanding of women and gender roles. Therefore, Christine’s own understanding and rationalization of women’s roles within society is brought into question, as well as her intentions in writing the book. There are various ways of interpreting whether she consciously aimed to challenge the pre-established gender roles or simply wished to create a platform to educate women against anti-feminism.

The City of Ladies was meant to be a sanctuary for women against the tyranny and oppression of men; “this City… will never be destroyed, nor will it ever fall, but will remain prosperous forever, regardless of all its jealous enemies,” (de Pizan 10). This City was an allegory for the book itself, which was meant to educate women and give them the power to fight against their misogynistic society. Education was a powerful tool for women; they couldn’t fight back not because they were “inherently inconstant and unstable,” but because they were uneducated in the rules of rhetorical debate – “without rhetorical training, women were unable to defend themselves against anti-feminist charges,” (McCormick 149). She aimed to teach her female audience to read as women rather than mindless “emasculated readers of the anti-feminist tradition,” (McCormick 151). She would take “the trowel of [her] pen,” (de Pizan 38) and build a collection of powerful, noble women as the foundation for future women to stand upon whenever they encountered anti-feminist rhetoric.

Gender roles were (and still are) an elaborate social structure, often originating from anti-feminist constructions of what it means to be a man or a woman. These roles were based on the assumption that there were innate differences between men and women which made them more suitable for one line of work over another. These differences were based on physicality (strengths and weaknesses), mentality (rationality and intelligence), and spirituality (virtuousness). Christine addressed each of these differences in disparate ways, recognizing some as generally true and challenging others as falsehoods.

There are undeniably natural differences between the sexes when it comes to physicality: size, reproductive functions, body hair, distribution of muscle and fat, etc. Christine understood these evident differences; however, she took this understanding a step farther when she implied a general feebleness to all women. “It is a proven fact,” Christine said to Reason, “that women have weak bodies, tender and feeble in deeds of strength,” (de Pizan 36). This could be interpreted as Christine internalizing the anti-feminist rhetoric and believing it to be true.

However, much of the book consists of Christine posing questions or statements like this, which are rooted in anti-feminism, only to have Reason refute them by reasonable explanation and historical examples. Reason gave many examples of strong female warriors, spending a great deal of time on the Amazons, who had “accomplished so much through the strength of their bodies that they were feared and respected by all countries,” (de Pizan 44).

At the same time, however, Reason never fully refuted the point about women being the weaker sex, as though the women she exemplified were simply exceptions to the definition of “woman.” Perhaps this was because Christine believed that women were generally physically weaker, but they were not mentally or spiritually weaker. In fact, she argued that women were given feeble bodies because Nature “makes up the difference with an even greater boon,” (de Pizan 36). That is to say, women were given weak bodies in exchange for excellent minds.

This shows how Christine was not trying to redefine gender roles, because she believed there were some inherent truths to the separation of the genders. She believed that God gave both men and women “a fitting and appropriate nature and inclination to fulfill their offices,” (de Pizan 31).

This interpretation means that Christine, like many others, defined certain characteristics as masculine or feminine. Christine seemed to agree with the popular opinion that strength was a masculine trait, but did not go so far as to say that “strength and physical daring are excluded from the feminine sex… because in many women God has made manifest enormous courage, strength, and boldness,” (de Pizan 37-38). The Amazons were an example of noble women who possessed masculine virtues.

She made similar claims about the intelligence of women and their ability to govern justly and efficiently – most often concerning widows left to manage their deceased husbands’ lands. These women were exceptional examples of wisdom and virtue who demonstrated that “a woman with a mind is fit for all tasks,” (de Pizan 32). In many of the historical examples Reason lists, women were even better than their male counterparts in traditionally masculine jobs – Empress Nicaula, Queen Blanche, Queen Semiramis, Queen Thamiris, Queen Zenobia the Amazonians Menalippe and Hippolyta, and countless others. Despite Reason’s rhetoric of historically successful women, Christine did not necessarily believe women were entitled to such offices as men were.

Women were often excluded from these political roles because they were seen as unfit for women to handle. If Christine was not aiming to redefine gender roles but simply wanted to educate women, it would make sense if she didn’t care about this societal norm. In fact, she thought it made no difference if women were not “involved in handing down decisions or pleading cases: for they have that fewer burdens on their souls and bodies,” (de Pizan 36).

While she believed women were perfectly capable of managing the offices of men, she thought they were more inclined to undertake other offices. In this way, even though the noble women Reason discussed were strong and intelligent, Christine may not have intended to redefine what it meant to be a “woman.”

This interpretation of Christine’s work claims she intended only to reeducate women; however, others view her as consciously and radically redefining the established gender roles. This can be interpreted in a number of ways; she could have been trying to eradicate all notions of gender roles, therefore implying that there are no inherent differences between the genders; or, she may have intended to reconstruct the current system of gender hierarchy to more accurately represent women.

It seems unlikely that she saw no differences between the genders. This was, reasonably, a fairly far-fetched notion for many cultures; if nothing else, there were physical differences between the genders that helped societies establish appropriate work for everyone. A universal example would be that women got pregnant and gave birth – therefore, it was a reasonable decision to make men do the more dangerous work, like hunting, in order to secure the continuance of the human race. These physical differences led people to the assumption that there were differences between the genders on an invisible scale, such as moral and intellectual differences. Christine was no exception from this line of thinking, and based on her observations of society, concluded that God made the genders separately “just as a wise and well ordered lord organizes his domain so that one servant accomplishes one task and another servant another task, and that what the one does the other does not do,” (de Pizan 31).

However, while she believed men and women generally held different physical, mental and spiritual traits, she did not believe female traits were any less valuable and challenged how women were often represented as the inferior sex. It is reasonable to interpret her work as an attempt to reconstruct the established gender roles. If this was her goal and she was trying to create a new system of gender roles, there were a few positions she could have taken – either she believed women were equal to men, or above them.

Christine believed that women and men held different traits, but that these traits were equally virtuous. While the genders performed different roles based on their natural inclinations or traits, that did not mean women’s roles held any less value or women were any less virtuous. She did not care about the specific jobs women held; rather, she was concerned about the anti-feminist claims of female morality. She “refused to see virtue as an exclusively male preserve,” and “sought to prove that both sexes were capable of pursing the universal goal of moral self-edification,” (Hollywood 189).

The anti-feminist attitudes about the weaker female intelligence and morality stemmed from the apparent weakness of the female body. Societies connected inner and outer strength in an attempt to understand something they could never really glimpse – the human heart. Christine, through Reason, pointed out that “a large and strong body never makes a strong and virtuous heart,” (de Pizan 37). She argued against the idea that women were naturally prone to sin because they had weak hearts and souls; instead, she said that “on the ethical level, men and women are truly equal,” (Hollywood 190).

In another interpretation, Christine argued that women were actually superior to men on a mental and spiritual level. She claimed that “although there are ignorant women, there are many women who have better minds and a more active sense of prudence and judgement than most men,” (de Pizan 35). Throughout her novel, she listed countless women who surpassed their male counterparts; such as Empress Nicaula, who was “so wise and so capable a leader” that there had never been a king “endowed with greater skill in politics, government, and sovereign justice,” (de Pizan 33). She also gave the example of Queen Blanche, who ruled France after the passing of her husband while her son was still a child; Reason stated that she ruled “so nobly and so prudently that it was never better ruled by any man,” (de Pizan 34).

In fact, Christine argued that it was often women’s physical inferiority which elevated them above men in these aspects. Through Nature’s attempt to balance the genders, women gained mental capacity where they lacked physical strength. It was also through their lack of physical strength, “this agreeable defect,” that they gained the moral high ground against men, because they were “excused from committing the horrible cruelties, the murders, and the terrible and serious crimes which have been perpetrated through force,” (de Pizan 37).

Ultimately, whether or not Christine intended to challenge the gender roles is irrelevant – it was the consequences of her work that impacted society, not her intentions. Her narrative succeeded in challenging the pre-established gender roles by allowing female readers to “envision forms of social life Christine herself might not have been able consciously to embrace,” (Hollywood 190).

She may have intended to reeducate women by “rewriting anti-feminist into pro-feminist rhetoric” through designing an “architectural memory space” of feminist figures (McCormick 152-53). If so, and she did not intend to challenge the contemporary societal norms, she still created a device for women to experience life outside of the constraints of gender roles. On the other hand, she may have consciously aimed to redefine gender roles what it meant to be “woman” by questioning the assumptions of women’s capacity for virtue, wisdom, justice, and courage. Such questions and her narrative of famous women served as the “allegorical building blocks” for the reconstruction of her “new definition of ‘Woman’,” (McCormick 153).

Today, Christine continues to impact society as a female author who spoke out against anti-feminism in her society. Her and various other female authors attempted to replace “the accepted anti-feminist definition of ‘Woman’ in both literary tradition and in women’s own lives and minds,” (McCormick 150). Reading literature from this feminist perspective is vital, otherwise anti-feminism will continue to enter the minds of individuals; that is because “any student faced with an all-male list of ‘classic’ authors will almost certainly learn to think that only male authors were successful,” and will be “confronted with the hard reality that not a single woman wrote anything good enough to be taught,” (Berges 596). Christine’s work educated women by revealing the intelligence and bravery they could possess, and, whether she intended to do so or not, brought women out the chains of oppression and into a state of better equality.

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