

Christine de Pizan: *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude*

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Christine de Pizan, a widow at the age of twenty-five, had to overcome her bereavement and to provide for herself, her children, her mother and her niece. Years after the death of her husband she was still fighting legal battles to obtain a pension. It was during these difficult times that she succeeded in establishing herself as a writer, a profession which had been the uncontested domain of men. Christine was well aware of the unconventionality of her situation. She refused to remarry and instead put herself through an intensive, self-directed program of study. It was a courageous way of coping with adversity.

Christine received the typical upbringing of a young lady of the upper classes. Her father, Tommaso da Pizzano, had accepted the invitation of King Charles V to become his court astrologer. He moved to France with his Venetian wife and daughter. Christine was then four years old. Raised in an Italian household while living at the French court, she grew up as bilingual. In spite of her mother's opposition and thanks to her father's better judgment she learned Latin. In 1369, at the age of fifteen, she married the man her father had chosen for her. It was a happy marriage, but her husband died after only ten years. During that time, Christine necessarily neglected her education, occupied as she was with household duties and childbearing. The youngest of her three children only lived a few years. When her surviving daughter was accepted as a nun at the convent of Poissy, and her son left for England as a page to the Earl of Salisbury, Christine was free to devote herself to her literary career.

Most of her works have been carefully edited and studied, notably those, such as *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Book of the Three Virtues*, dealing with the role and status of women in society.¹ Her defense of women in the *Querelle du Roman de la Rose* has been much discussed. But *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude*, written between 1402 and 1403 for Charles VI and the Princes of the 'Fleurs de Lys', instead is neglected. This dismissal is strange in the light of the fact that it was *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude* which first established Christine de Pizan, in the eyes of her contemporaries, as the first important woman writer. In this poem she displayed, even more than in her earlier work, the mastery of the cultural knowledge and rhetorical skills which were regarded as the marks of a serious and committed writer. In addition, the work holds an important place in Christine's oeuvre; in it she addressed for the first time those political and ethical problems which would be the predominant themes of her subsequent, mature works.

Why this discrepancy between the views of modern critics such as Gaston Paris, Arturo Farinelli, Henri Hauvette, and Marie-Joseph Pinet, who disparage the work, and the praise given it by Christine's contemporaries? It results at least in part from a failure to read the work in terms of the context - both personal and political - in which it was written. From the Renaissance until recently, intertextuality was considered derivative plagiarizing. This prejudice betrays a failure to recognize the poem as a serious attempt to address the very grave and complex political issues of the time.^{/2} The dismissal of the poem also fails to take into account the ways in which Christine transforms her models to adapt them to her context. Only by retracing Christine's supernatural journey - in theory - will it be possible to develop a deeper understanding of the poem and its issues, uncovering the extent to which her approach to the world of learning was feminine and about *praxis* .

First, the poem's title. ^{/3} As all commentators have noted, this is a direct translation of the words that Dante pronounces when Virgil appears to him in the first canto of the *Commedia* .

O delli poeti onore e lume
vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m'ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.

The poem begins with a dedication to King Charles VI and the princes of his court. It is written in decasyllables, a line which had traditionally been used for epic poetry, though by the end of the fourteenth century its use had been extended to other genres; it was considered more dignified than the octosyllabic line favored by writers of narrative and didactic poetry. Then, like Dante, Christine begins the poem proper with a description of the thoughts that occupied her mind before the Sibyl appeared to her. A comparison with the opening tercet of the *Commedia* shows how much Christine departs from her model. She sets the stage in her own house and she laments the blow inflicted on her by fortune with the death of her husband. The recollection of Christine's married life is a song of fulfillment of mutual love in happiness as well as in sorrow. She emphasizes its personal tone by using the heptasyllabic line favored by writers of lyric poetry. She then makes a skilful transition to the octosyllabic line, which she will retain throughout the rest of the poem. The reflection on her own condition as a wife and then as a widow, merely sketched here, would be the main theme of one of her best-known works, *The Book of the Three Virtues* , in which she examined the role and responsibility of women in society.

If we exclude the introduction, the didactic and narrative body of the poem written in heptasyllabic meter clearly divides into two sections. The first (II-VII) outlines Christine's educational program under the Sibyl's guidance. In the second part (VIII-

XIII), Christine expresses her concerns about the disastrous political situation in which France was plunged after the death of Charles V, the wise king.

There is ample evidence that Christine knew and used Dante's Italian poem intertextually. However, in the attempt to establish the extent to which Christine was indebted to the Italian poem, critics have neglected evaluating the manner in which Christine adapted Dante's vision to her own poetic world and to the historical reality of her own time. She borrows from Dante the framework of a supernatural journey. But it is only a point of departure. Let us recall the opening lines of the *Commedia*:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

The apparition of Virgil to Dante constitutes for him the possibility of finding a way out of the obscure forest of sin. Having come to a turning point in his life, his goal must be the redemption of his soul under the guidance of reason. Christine evokes the episode, and Dante's words:

Vaille moy long estude

qu m'a fait cercier tes volumes (1136-1137)

when she realizes that the path on which the Sibyl is leading her is the way to learning. Christine's concerns are neither theological nor metaphysical; her quest for knowledge is seen in its function of the attainment of human wisdom.

Several illuminations in manuscripts of her work represent Christine in her study where she is taking pleasure in reading and writing to divert her mind from sad thoughts. This is also the setting of the poem's beginning. Before taking the readers on her supernatural journey, Christine presents herself to them as a narrator and as a woman. We see her moving about the house, picking up a book or two, being dissatisfied with them, and finally becoming absorbed in Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae*. The picture of himself that Dante gives at the outset of his poem is powerful, concise and combre; Christine's self-portrait is gentle, diffuse and delicate. It is also exquisitely feminine and Gothic in style.

This development sets the stage for her vision which begins with the apparition of a woman, who reveals herself to be the Cumaean Sibyl, called Almathea (Soulgoddess) by Christine; she is the one who had taken Aeneas through the underworld (in the story Dante then had appropriated for his poem, having instead the male Virgin be his guide). She had predicted, with the other nine Sibyls, the coming of Christ. After telling the story of her long life, the Sibyl offers herself as guide to Christine. She will show her a more perfect world. Christine accepts with joy, saying: 'Allez davant! J'iray derriere' (698). The line is an adaptation of the words with which Dante closes

the first canto of the *Commedia* and begins his journey with Virgil: 'Allor si mosse ed io gli tenni dietro' (*Inferno* I.136).

Here again Christine departs from her model. Dante speaks of, not to Virgil; he watches him and follows him. No other detail is given. Christine changes Dante's description into an expression of direct address, charged with eagerness and anticipation. While Dante always used the 'tu' (thou) form with Virgil, thus stressing a role of male solidarity, Christine uses the plural form with the Sibyl, while the Sibyl uses the 'tu' form to Christine, thereby suggesting a mother-daughter relationship between them. In a feminine way, Christine goes on to describe the kind of dress and headgear she put on; she even takes the precaution of shortening her gown in order to be able to walk more quickly. The landscape in which the two women begin their journey is not the dark forest of Dante and Virgil, but a meadow full of flowers.

Why did Christine choose a woman as guide? To answer the question we have to look back at the *Querelle du Roman de la Rose*, which had been 'an important stimulus to Christine to pursue the idea of pointing out the merit of women in their historical role'. The Sibyl, like Virgil, had predicted the coming of Christ. She had had an important role in both the pagan and the Christian worlds as a woman and a prophet. What sources did Christine follow? The source for the story of the Sibyl is the *Ovide Moralisé*. The fourteenth-century translator had considerably amplified the account of the Sibyl's story as given by Ovid. But Christine must also have used the original Latin version because her account of the Sibyl's story has the same vivacious tightness and concision which makes the charm of the Latin text. The Latin poet told how the Sibyl received from Phoebus the gift, or rather the curse, of a thousand-year-long life, but she had neglected to request everlasting youth to go along with it. (We see her in the manuscript illuminations as elderly, in contrast to Christine's youthfulness.) The medieval translator retold the story, but also included the legend according to which the Sibyl had predicted the coming of Christ. He - or she - made a point of stressing the Sibyl's prophetic power and divine wisdom. Christine follows both Ovid and the *Ovide Moralisé* closely, even having the Sibyl speak in the first person. It is as a student to the Sibyl's school of learning that Christine begins her journey.

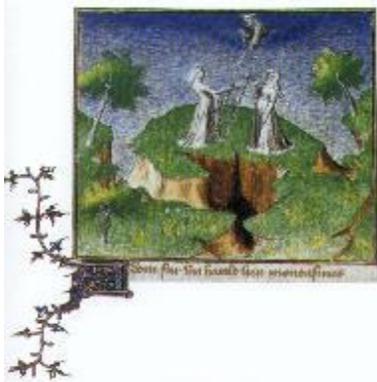


The two women reach a high mountain from which a fountain flows. Its water is fresh and clear, nine naked women bathe in it while a winged horse flies over them. In the manner of Dante, Christine asks who they are. The Sibyl replies that the mountain is Parnassus; the nine women are the Muses; the winged horse, Pegasus; the spring, the fountain of knowledge. All the great sages of antiquity, and Christine's own father as well, used to come and drink its waters. The Sibyl adds that the path they follow is called 'Long Estude'. Christine thanks the Sibyl for showing her the path. She remembers that she had read about it in Dante's poem and recalls his words to Virgil. But it is precisely at this point that Dante and Christine go separate ways. Virgil led Dante through the horrors of hell; the Sibyl shows her pupil the wonders of the earth.

Following John de Mandeville's pilgrimage, the Sibyl takes her pupil on a world tour. They visit the whole Mediterranean basin; they make a dutiful, but rather nondescript stop at the Holy Land; they take a detour to the monastery of St Catherine and to the land of Prester John. Christine manages to enliven the narrative with a frugal touch. When they reach the island of Cathary she sees silk, gold, silver and spices in great abundance, but she does not buy anything. Finally, the Sibyl shows her the wall of fire surrounding Paradise, but they cannot enter it because an angel stands guarding the gate.

Instead, they go to the top of a mountain where the Sibyl calls in Greek to someone who immediately appears. She asks for a ladder so that her pupil can climb to the firmament. The ladder which is provided is very long, light and strong; the material it is made of is called 'speculation'. As the Sibyl explains, the path of long learning cannot lead to the firmament unless it is complemented by speculation, Boethius' *theoretica*. Christine crosses herself and starts climbing. She looks down and sees the earth; it looks like a tiny little ball, the image borrowed from Cicero, Boethius and Dante:

. . . e vidi questo globo
tal, ch'io sorrisi del suo vil sembiante. (*Paradiso* XII.134-135)



Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 10982, fol. 25

Dante smiles condescendingly at this sight. But Christine is frightened. Icarus' fate comes to her mind, but the Sibyl reassures her: her wish to reach the firmament is not dictated by presumption, but by the desire to learn the mysteries and beauties of the universe. Unlike Dante, the two women do not ascend to the highest theological spheres; Christine meets instead with the influences and destinies assigned to men and women alike at their birth. To her sorrow, she sees there all the evils that ravage the earth, wars, famine, death and destruction. Finally, at each of the four cardinal points she comes to the presence of the four Queens, Wisdom to the east, Nobility to the north, Chivalry to the south, and Wealth to the west, in descending order of Christine's approval of these virtues. Above them is God's Daughter, Reason, an olive branch in her right hand, a naked sword in her left. An ambassador brings her a letter from the Great Mother Earth which Eloquence reads to her.

Christine has now completed her educational training under the Sibyl's guidance. In the second part of the poem she feels strong enough to deal with the problems of the world, and to offer a possible solution. To this end she stages a debate amongst the four Queens, with Reason as their moderator. Her thoughts on ethical, political and economical matters are woven into their speeches. After a preliminary discussion, it is agreed that to restore peace and justice in the world, a supreme ruler, a philosopher king, must be elected. Then each Queen presents a candidate. There is no doubt that the references in the poem are to real people, though their identity today is unclear. Instead of speculating over the candidates' identities, it is more important to understand Christine's values and discover which are the attributes of the perfect ruler according to each category.

Nobility speaks first. She stresses the importance of lineage, and Christine alludes several times in the course of the poem to the fact that the French monarchs are descendants of the Trojan kings. It comes as no surprise that she should choose Charles VI as Nobility's candidate. She also manages to pay homage to several members of the House of Burgundy, who in fact continued to patronize her work. This attitude

could be considered opportunism if Christine had not had the courage to decalre, using Wisdom as her spokeswoman, that no man can be considered noble if he is not virtuous. Uncompromisingly, Christine takes up the question of the nobility of the heart of which Boethius, Jean de Meung and Dante had already been supporters.

Who is Chivalry's candidate still remains to be discovered. But we do have some clues in regard to Christine's opinion of this institution. When she sees her first amongst the other Queens, she is struck by her bellicose and arrogant appearance. French Chivalry had disgraced itself during the so-called 'Crusade' which the European princes had organized to help the Christian Emperor of Constantinople against the Turkish Sultan Bejazet. The expedition was meant to be a revival of chivalric values, but it was used by the participants to enhance their own personal interests; it ended disastrously with the defeat of the Christian army at Nicopolis in 1392. Christine lends her voice to Wisdom in reminding Chivalry that, according to the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury, a knight has many duties, notably, to defend the Catholic faith and the common welfare, women and orphans, and, she adds with a personal touch, widows. A good knight must not covet riches; he must avoid lust, gluttony and laziness. It can be assumed that French knights were forgetful of such duties. Christine draws from ancient and contemporary history for examples which insist on the knight's obligation to respect women. The *Querelle du Roman de la Rose* was not to be forgotten.

In describing Wealth's candidate, Christine shows that her eyes are not closed to reality. She knows only too well that no king, no matter how valiant or wise, can hold on to his power if he is not rich. At the same time, she touches on a problem of great concern to the French people, namely the brutally unfair taxing system that would finally explode in the bloodshed of the Revolution.

Charles V would have been Wisdom's perfect choice, but he had been dead for twenty years. He is evoked as an exemplary and wise ruler, well versed in philosophy, poetry and astronomy. Christine knew the contents of the king's library from first-hand experience; she points out that his love of learning was not limited to the improvement of his own mind; by sponsoring French translations of Latin works, he showed that the wisdom of antiquity was not incompatible with Christian virtues. Christine here touches on an important aspect of learning in the second half of the fourteenth century, its classical Humanism. Wisdom's portrait of the ideal ruler is culled from Aristotle, Plutarch and other authorities.

As she has done elsewhere in the poem, Christine weaves anecdotes into her citations, but it is interesting to note that particularly in Wisdom's speech several stories show women playing a significantly active role. When Christine states that a good ruler must exercise moderation in drinking, she tells how Philip of Macedon condemned a woman while he was inebriated. She demanded that the king judge her when he was

sober, to which he consented and, then, revoked the sentence. The anecdote allows Christine to emphasize the rights of a woman faced with an unfair judgement. The ideal prince must not be vindictive; he must rule firmly, but mercifully. Seneca tells of a prince who had exterminated all his enemies by one. He asked his wife's advice, and she suggested the use of kindness rather than strength. He followed her advice, and the former enemy became a devoted friend. Through this anecdote, Christine points subtly to the influence which a woman can have in private and in public life. One of the major concerns of a wise ruler must be the administration of justice. The well-known story of the poor widow and the Emperor Trajan did not escape Christine's attention. She must have identified with this woman who demanded that her son's killers be punished. Christine too had had to beg for justice in the legal battles she had to fight after her husband's death.

At the conclusion of the debate, the decision is made to have the matter settled on earth rather than in Heaven. It is resolved that the French princes should elect the supreme ruler who will put an end to the evil in the world. But another problem arises. How can the message be sent to the French court? The Sibyl comes forth. She knows the right person, Christine, who, like herself, was born in Italy. It was not unlike Dante, with his hopes in an emperor, for Christine to similarly hope in the miraculous appearance of a king who would restore to order the chaos of French politics. Following the courage of her convictions, after completing *Le Chemin*, she again took that message to the French court.

At the end of the poem we find Christine bidding farewell to her guide and retiring to the intimacy of her own chamber. She is awakened the following day by her mother and the poem ends with the same closing line as the *Roman de la Rose*: 'car tart estoit et je m'esveille'. Though it is true Christine was Jean de Meung's declared enemy, the intertextuality of this line could be interpreted as a tribute to him. Like him, she believed in Reason, Knowledge and Wisdom. In addition, the last line provides a further comparison with the *Commedia*. Dante ends each cantica with the word 'stelle'. By conscious contrast to the *Commedia*, Christine returns from her journey to the same place where it had begun; a modest, domestic interior, a feminine and intimate household. In her pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, her journey remains earthbound.

Christine's primary concern is the formulation of civic and moral values that could be applied to the urgent problems of her time. The king had been suffering since 1392 from bouts of insanity; his younger brother, Louis of Orléans, had become increasingly powerful, in spite of the opposition of their uncle, Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. The state treasury was being depleted by extravagant expenses for the amusement of the court, while heavy taxes were imposed on the people. Christine did not remain a spectator of such events. In her writings she focussed on the role and

mission of the ideal monarch, the ambitions of the nobility, and the selfishness of the chivalry.

In 1404, the Duke of Burgundy commissioned Christine to write the biography of his brother, Charles V. Christine portrayed him as a model of wisdom, knowledge, learning and clemency. After the sudden death of Philip the Bold that same year, his son, Jean Sans Peur, continued his father's opposition to the power of Louis of Orléans and to his taxing of the people. France was on the verge of civil war. On 5 October 1405, Christine addressed a letter to the queen, Isabeau of Bavaria, in which she urged her to exercise her influence upon the king, so that he could put an end to the quarrel between the two princes. Negotiations took place and peace was made, but it lasted only two years. Then the Duke of Orléans was murdered by order of Jean Sans Peur.

Christine continued to discuss the ethical virtues required of a ruler in *Le Livre du Corps de Policie* which she wrote between 1406 and 1407. In *Le Livre des Faits d'Armes et de Chevalerie* she discussed the whole problem of warfare and its ethical implications. In *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude* she had already taken a strong stand in regard to the institution of Chivalry. In 1418 she withdrew from public life. Her last known work is a hymn to John of Arc, written in 1429. She may have died shortly after that date. She had stated that the true spirit of Chivalry had been destroyed due to greed and self-interest. History was to prove how Sibylline she was. French Chivalry suffered a disastrous defeat at the Battle of Agincourt in 1411.

Christine's position at the court was too precarious to allow her to speak her mind entirely. She had to depend on the royal family and on noble, wealthy patrons to support her and to ensure a career for her son. But she used the text of the *Commedia* to remind her rulers that it was their duty to restore peace to the country, to improve the lot of the poor, and to protect and defend the rights of women. She had begun her career by writing feminine ballads and love lyrics and could have continued in that vein; but she believed she had a role to play in society, of being an ethically and politically committed writer. In turning to Italian Dante's *Commedia*, and its echoing of Roman Virgil's *Aeneid* as her model in France, she began that role in writing *Le Chemin de Long Estude*.

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Notes

Extracted from the essay originally published in *Equally in God's Image: Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Julia Bolton Holloway, Joan Bechtold, and Constance S. Wright (Berne: Peter Lang, 1990), pp. 103-116.

1 Mademoiselle Louise de Kéralio published excerpts of Christine de Pizan's work in *Collections des meilleurs ouvrages françois composés par des femmes*, vols. II, III (Paris, 1787); Gaston Paris, 'Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude par Christine de Pizan', *Romania*, 19 (1881), 318; Arturo Farinelli, *Dante nell'opere di Christine de Pisan* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1905); Henri Hauvette, *Etudes sur la Divine Comédie* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1911), pp. 149-153; Rose Rigaud, *Les idées féministes de Christine de Pisan* (Neufchatel: Université de Neufchatel, 1911); Charity Cannon Willard, 'A Fifteenth-Century View of Woman's Role in Medieval Society: Christine de Pisan's *Livre de Trois Vertues*', in *The Role of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rosemary Thee Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975); Diane Bornstein, *Ideals for Women in the Works of Christine de Pizan* (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute, 1981); Regine Pernoud, *Christine de Pizan* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1982).

2 Raymond Thomassy, *Essai sur les écrits politiques de Christine de Pisan, suivi d'une notice littéraire de pièces inédites* (Paris: Debecourt, 1838); P.G.C. Campbell, 'Christine de Pisan en Angleterre', *Revue de littérature comparés* 5 (1925); Marguerite Favier, *Christine de Pizan: muse des cours souveraines* (Lausanne: Editions Rencontre, 1967); Claude Gauvard, 'Christine de Pisan a-t-elle eu une pensée politique? A propos des ouvrages récents', *Revue historique* 250 (1973), pp. 417-430; Gianni Mombello, 'Quelques aspects de la pensée politique de Christine de Pizan d'après ses oeuvres publiées', *Culture et politique en France à l'époque de l'Humanisme et de la Renaissance: Etudes réunies par Franco Simone* (Torino: Accademia delle Scienze, 1974), pp. 43-153; Josette A. Wisman, 'L'éveil du sentiment national au Moyen Age; la pensée politique de Christine de Pisan', *Revue historique* 257 (1977), 289-297; Sandra Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's 'Epitre d'Othea': Painting and Politics at the Court of Charles VI* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1986).

3 References to the poem follow the edition by Robert Püschel, *Le Livre du Chemin de Long Estude* (Paris: Le Soudier, 1887), 2nd ed.