

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN'S CITY OF LADIES: A MONUMENTAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF, BY, AND FOR WOMEN OF ALL TIME

JILL E. WAGNER¹

Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, written over six centuries ago, is neither simple nor simplistic. As the first known history of women in Western civilization from a female point of view, it embraces all virtuous women even beyond those specifically mentioned. Fashioned as an allegorical city, it should be considered a potential textual buttress for contemporary feminist consciousness.

Christine constructs her history as both an allegory and a city of ladies for several possible reasons. First, Christine can "speak" to readers by channeling her own persona into her main character. Further, the form of authorial conversation with allegorical figures was a popular didactic medieval convention, and this textual structure remains accessible today. When Judith L. Kellogg writes, "the space in which the city [of ladies] is built must be within each woman,"² she bridges the six-hundred years since the writing of *The Book of the City of Ladies* with a few strokes of her pen. In other words, Christine urges individual women to take the first step toward realizing a feminist hereafter. By writing (as author) and creating (as heroine) a city of ladies, Christine emphasizes women's spaces, self-defense, and memory as keys to the creation of women's history and future. All three keys transcend time, just like her monumental city.

Christine anticipated the feminist necessity of Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," but she builds on a grand scale and follows medieval tradition in deliberately selecting a city, not a room. While giving voice to the unvoiced, thus presenting her public with provocative new material, she adheres to an established, respected historical model, St. Augustine's *City of God*. This work's religious, eternal city was described more than a millennium before *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Such a decision

to adopt Augustine's textual model lends authority and credibility to Christine's work while setting up a means of comparison and contrast. A critical reader will notice that both cities' residents are from all eras and locations.³ Augustine's city is also "both the pinnacle of civilization and [. . .] source of identity"⁴—just like the city of ladies. Inhabitants of his eternal city are known by their desire for what God loves, and others identify them by their place of habitation. The city defines them. However, Christine's city is even more elaborate than Augustine's, according to Kate Langdon Forhan; an entire book is devoted to describing its construction, and Christine published its sequel, *The Book of Three Virtues*, in 1405.⁵ With these texts, Christine is proving that women can build, are powerful and creative, and deserve to live in safety and comfort—in short, to eternally reside in a glorious world like Augustine's.

At the beginning of her tale, Christine is living far from such a city; she is "sitting alone in my study."⁶ The original French term for Christine's study, *mon cele* [my cell], suggests solitude in a monastery.⁷ It could be a place of peace; initially Christine appears relaxed, in search of "some light poetry."⁸ Christine assures the reader that her room is a haven of contented study and intellectual pursuit: she is "surrounded by books on all kinds of subjects, devoting myself to literary studies, my usual habit."⁹ However, the term *mon cele* could also suggest seclusion in a prison—solitary confinement, or entrapment at the hands of men with evil designs. Christine calls her room "the troubled and dark tabernacle of this simple and ignorant student."¹⁰ The student is alone, "transfixed [. . .] in a stupor"; when awakened, she notices she has been sitting in a shadow.¹¹ These images may connote drugging, solitary confinement, and darkness. Though Christine is not literally trapped, her mind is bound by antifeminist notions she finds in some of her books. The antifeminism she reads fills her with self-doubt; she says, "my feeble sense does not know the craft, or the measures, or the study, or the science, or the practice of construction."¹² (Similarly, Christine the writer was filled with doubt and "hatred of self" after reading antifeminist writers Ovid and Jean de Meun).¹³ Only

with the leadership of Ladies Reason, Justice, and Rectitude can Christine exit her *cele* and begin building her city.¹⁴

Preparation for the city's foundation necessitates examination and removal of misogyny, and the "Field of Letters" is a literal field, but also another field, an area of knowledge that must be refashioned. As Christine clears the field (and makes clear the plight of women) with her digging, she "broke new ground" in more ways than one.¹⁵ Christine digs, and Lady Reason expands Christine's knowledge of misogyny in the first step toward change, then carries away the dirt. Together, they prepare a section of "flat and fertile plain" on which to lay their foundation of protofeminism.¹⁶ The field becomes a sort of level playing field because the clearing of it gives women's arguments validity.¹⁷ Once the muck of misogyny is removed from the field, the rich substance of earth can bring forth fruit like in the Garden of Eden. As Lady Reason notes, "the earth abounds in all good things" at the site of the city of ladies.¹⁸ As four women literally build the city, and women throughout history are its building blocks, their joint creation springs naturally from the ground. With the antifeminist mud discarded, tender female "plants" can reach for the light of enlightenment that was the origin of Christine's epiphany.

The naturalness of building a female city and the rejection of misogyny metaphorically portrayed by clearing the land are also emphasized in the next building step. To mark the placement of the foundation stone Semiramis, Lady Reason tells her architect, "I want you to know that Nature herself has foretold in the signs of the zodiac that it be placed and situated in this work."¹⁹ Nature has willed Christine's city into being. Reason immediately adds, "So I shall draw you back a little and I will throw it down for you."²⁰ Her wording is curious; rather than carefully situating the foundation stone, she hurls it. This physical act has three notable implications. First, the cornerstone will land where Nature intends it to land, and Christine and all the future inhabitants of her city must trust in Nature's judgment. Nature, then, wills that women are worthy of preservation, protection, and celebration. Second, Reason's throwing is a reminder that the creation of an authentic

woman's space requires force—the act of throwing. The architect cannot sit passively and hope for such a space to create itself. Third, the act of breaking from misogyny requires assistance from other women. Friendship and community are crucial in establishing a strong feminist platform. Christine cannot build the city alone.

The woman's space that Christine, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice create on the Field of Letters is just as valid, if not better, than the "male spaces" created in the wake of misogynist texts. The city of ladies is independent and unparalleled in self-sustenance; Lady Reason tells Christine her city will be "without equal."²¹ It is not as good as any cities that might spring up nearby—it is better. Lady Reason declares that the city will be eternally wealthy, so the reader can presume that every occupation required for a city's smooth functioning is skillfully filled in the city of ladies—by a woman.²² Without the presence of men, women can define themselves, and that control is, according to Glenda McLeod, women's "surest defense."²³

Christine's formation of women's history as a city shows the ability of authentic female friendship, when formed in women's spaces, to cross barriers of time. Because they share commonalities of good character, women from past and present (and Christine's future—our present) form an exclusive community in the "New Kingdom of Femininity."²⁴ Christine identifies and embraces women before and after her time—all loving women. Before the queen of the city arrives, Christine addresses the city's residents as "all women who have loved and do love and will love virtue and morality."²⁵ She echoes this statement when all the city's residents are gathered, calling them "all of you who love glory, virtue, and praise [. . .] ladies from the past as well as from the present and future [. . .] every honorable lady."²⁶ Despite their differences, the "virtuous wives and mothers, chaste virgins and self-sacrificing women" are all "heroines of worth and valor."²⁷ Christine, as one of these women, finds "intellectual and spiritual revitalization through the community of queens, classical figures, and martyrs."²⁸ In the woman's space that is the city of

ladies, the goal of friendship to lift one another up in love and encouragement is realized.

Christine's city also establishes smaller personal spaces for women. Though in a community that highlights their similarities, the women retain their individuality, and their stories remain distinct. Likewise, although most of the construction details are about the walls and roofs, the city clearly does not lack splendid residences and gathering places for worthy women. Lady Rectitude orchestrates the creation of various smaller women's spaces, from temples and palaces to houses and public buildings, from streets to public squares, and she also specifically mentions "fair and sturdy mansions and inns [. . .] made of fine shining gold."²⁹ These spaces reflect the positive attributes of Christine's study and its splendence at the moment of the Ladies' arrival.

Besides establishing women's spaces rich in self-sufficiency, independence, and friendship, Christine creates a city reliant on self-defense. It is a reminder to women of their natural ability to defend themselves. Lady Reason informs Christine of the "special reason" for her arrival and that of Justice and Fortitude:

so that from now on, ladies and all valiant women may have a refuge and defense against the various assailants, those ladies who have been abandoned for so long, exposed like a field without a surrounding hedge [. . .] It is no wonder then that their jealous enemies, those outrageous villains who have assailed them with various weapons, have been victorious in a war in which women have had no defense.³⁰

In her final words to the other female city residents, Christine reminds them the city is "the refuge for you all [. . .] but also the defense and guard against your enemies and assailants."³¹ The city's defense must be eternal. The city of ladies will be durable far beyond the present and near future. Lady Reason tells Christine it "will be [. . .] of perpetual duration in the world"³² and a "strong and *lasting* defense" (original emphasis).³³ It "will never be destroyed, nor will it ever fall [. . .] regardless of all its jealous enemies. Although it will be stormed by numerous assaults, it will never be taken or conquered."³⁴ The entire city and its constituent parts are lasting. In addition, Lady Reason draws

attention to the city's "*durable* and pure mortar [. . .]" (original emphasis).³⁵ Because it is durable, women of the future can look to their predecessors for comfort, encouragement, and advice by example. Gerda Lerner says Christine's gift to women is "insight that women must look to other women for their defense and that the collective past of women could be a source of strength to them in their struggle for justice."³⁶ Christine suggests that more and more women can learn from the past.

The principle characteristic feature of the city's defense is its walls.³⁷ The walls of the city are built, at Lady Reason's insistence, immediately after the foundation of the city of ladies is complete.³⁸ The need for defense is strong, as Christine was aware; during his reign, Charles V built a new city wall around Paris which Christine considered a significant achievement.³⁹ Before any attention is given to her city's inner construction, its outer shell must be formed. The walls are "strongly constructed and well founded."⁴⁰ The walls, and the buildings, are made of "building stone, stronger and more durable than any marble with cement could be."⁴¹ Lady Reason calls the walls "lofty" high and thick.⁴² In addition, they are "so high that they [city inhabitants] will not fear anyone,"⁴³ and Lady Rectitude mentions their "breadth and long circuit."⁴⁴ They need these attributes to protect women "from the arrows of male attack."⁴⁵ If multiple physical barriers between strangers and the city of ladies' inhabitants are required, and if such excess was atypical of medieval cities, Christine is pointing out that protection of her ladies' city is of the utmost concern. No expense is spared to keep them safe.

If the city is meant to be a defensive structure, its construction allows Christine to be not only the author of *The Book of the City of Ladies* but also a "champion"⁴⁶ who can be a symbol of strength and innovation. While some scholarship views the rise of the typical medieval town as an act of collective "organic unity," Fritz Rorig claims that there were officials responsible for city formation, and these important people involved in the city's construction were master builders.⁴⁷ Christine is a master builder. She is a demonstration of human creativity and strength, all in the face of pre-established male

histories and ideas. With her city's construction, she "physically erases the harmful implications of Jean de Meun's fortifications"⁴⁸; thirteenth-century de Meun had continued Guillaume de Lorris' allegorical poem *Roman de la Rose*, adding about seventeen-thousand verses of vicious antifeminist satire to de Lorris' tale of courtly love. Christine also creatively updates Boccaccio's treatise structure; while his *De Mulieribus Claris* resembles an encyclopedic list of entries, Christine's text uses an allegorical frame by which "she also stages her own authority and, in effect, turns herself into her own figure of authority."⁴⁹

The third implication of Christine's construction of the first female-authored women's history as a city is to aid women in remembering their past to form their future. To help women remember their predecessors and their virtues, Christine bases her women's history on a historical model of material retention, the memory palace. McLeod explains how speakers memorized material by mentally putting it in a structure.⁵⁰ For example, if one were to employ the medieval memory palace model to remember a list of famous feminists today, first one would think of a familiar building. Then one would mentally "place" one feminist in each room of the building—Betty Friedan in the entryway, Margaret Sanger in the living room, Mary Wollstonecraft in the dining room, etc. To recall the feminists, one would imaginatively "walk" through the building recalling each person.

Christine's memory palace is more clever and complex. Christine separates her structure, the city comparable to our building in the feminist example, into parts: foundation, walls, houses, palaces, streets, and inhabitants. (These parts are comparable to the rooms in the feminist example). But rather than placing each illustrious woman in each part of the city, she literally makes the woman a part of the city. Queen Semiramis, a powerful warrior and city-builder herself, is the city's foundation stone. She is both part of the city's construction and an inhabitant. By making each woman serve dual purposes, Christine extends the memory. Typical medieval memory palace structures were similar to effaceable wax tablets on which different images

could be placed⁵¹—one building could be used to remember multiple series of material—but Christine’s blending eternalizes her women. They cannot be wiped clean. They are the tablets and what’s written on them.

There are several benefits of forming a history as an allegorical city and memory palace. First, the entire memory palace structure enables someone to select a part of the city and move sequentially backward or forward in its layout and therefore in the established sequence of women. Christine does not organize her history chronologically but rather thematically. A reader can mentally picture a part of the city and focus on the virtues of the women within it. Next, the memory palace proves to women that they can remember and subsequently act well from application of biographical knowledge: “Christine fashions an artificial memory system within the text that provides a means for women to develop an ethical memory practice, thereby disproving the anti-feminist tradition of women’s vice and inconstancy.”⁵² Betsy McCormick adds, “by using the memory as an ethical repository and guide, an individual would be equipped to act prudently and ethically.”⁵³ With Christine’s help, women can learn, memorize, and apply moral behavior from commendable historical examples.

Christine’s allegorical city, with its triple emphasis on women’s spaces, defense, and memory, likewise emphasizes past, present, and future. Christine establishes a precedent of creative women’s history that modern scholars and artists still follow. She creates a monument, a lasting representative work, a “mnemonic matrix for future literary creations by women.”⁵⁴ Because *The Book of the City of Ladies* provided Christine’s contemporaries with an accessible protofeminist allegory of women’s history, a city, the text remains applicable. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber writes of Christine’s gift to women of all time, “Christine built the memory of her sex. Dipping her mortar in ink, she made time the property of her sisters past and present.”⁵⁵ In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women (and men) continue to represent artistically women’s power. For example, Margarete Zimmermann mentions Judy Chicago’s 1979 massive artistic display, *Dinner Party*, a monument to notable women (including Christine), as similar to

the city of ladies: “a gender-specific cultural memory is given a spatial shape.”⁵⁶

Finally, Christine’s city draws a comparison between God’s creative abilities and Christine’s (as she builds a city). Early in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine reads Matheolus’ and others’ scathing accounts of women: “the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice.” She “finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman, and I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned to make such an abominable work which, from what they say, is the vessel as well as the refuge and abode of every evil and vice.” She adds, “in my folly I considered myself most unfortunate because God had made me inhabit a female body in this world.”⁵⁷ Throughout her building project, Christine’s attitude toward herself radically changes. By the conclusion of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she no longer recognizes herself as a negative “vessel.” Instead, she praises her “textual citadel”⁵⁸ to her female audience and thanks God for allowing her to “live in this world.”⁵⁹ As she proves herself to be a master builder, one could see her as the aforementioned “worthy artisan”—like God in the ultimate metaphoric magnification of power. Her city’s construction can also be compared to God’s creation of the world as described in Genesis, as “the symbol of building a fortified city was often used to represent” this.⁶⁰ As God builds the world and woman, so Christine builds with and builds up women in a protofeminist world.

By re-“constructing” the past, Christine builds a feminist framework for the future. She can be considered the founder of the modern woman’s movement, making a bold statement in the *Querelle des Femmes*, a long continuous battle between authors who attacked and who defended women. Like a monumental building, *The Book of the City of Ladies* survives and thrives as an important cultural artifact, and like a monumental treatise, it pays tribute via words to women from the past. As depicted in Christine’s determinedly hopeful treatise, Christine’s historical city is a truly monumental textual treasure.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

END NOTES

1. I would like to thank Gail Berlin for her kind assistance in shaping this article and my perception of Christine de Pizan. All de Pizan quotations are taken from *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea, 1982) unless otherwise indicated.
2. Judith L. Kellogg, "Le Livre de la Cité des Dames: Reconfiguring Knowledge and Reimagining Gendered Space," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 129-46; p. 140.
3. Julia Simms Holderness, "Castles in the Air? The Prince as Conceptual Artist," in *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), pp. 161-75; p. 163.
4. Kate Langdon Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), p. 47.
5. Forhan, *Political Theory*, p. 47.
6. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea, 1982), p. 3.
7. Holderness, "Castles in the Air?" p. 166.
8. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 3.
9. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 3.
10. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 15.
11. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, pp. 3, 4, & 6.
12. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 15.
13. "Christine de Pizan: Equalizing Love in the City of Women," *Virtual Museum of Canada*. Archived <<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Valentin/English/4/444.php3>>.
14. Similarly, for this essay I gratefully rely on the textual foundations of other scholars of medieval literature and feminism in order to construct my arguments.
15. Kathleen Casey, "The Cheshire Cat: Reconstructing the Experience of Medieval Women," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1976), pp. 224-49; p. 244.
16. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 16.
17. Jody Enders, "The Feminist Mnemonics of Christine de Pizan," *Modern Language Quarterly* 55.3 (Sept. 1994): 231-49, p. 241.
18. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 16.
19. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 38.
20. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 38. This sentence in the earliest accessible French version (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, trans. Eric Hicks et Thérèse Moreau [Imprint Paris: Stock, 1986]) reads: "Reculé-toi donc un peu, et je poserai pour toi cette première pierre." The word "poser" means "to set, lay, or place (a foundation stone)." It is curious that the Richards translation, the most easily accessible and commonly used English translation and the one selected

- for this essay, translates “poserai” as “will throw.”
21. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 11.
 22. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 11.
 23. Glenda McLeod, “Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics in Christine de Pizan’s *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*,” in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992), pp. 37-47; p. 44.
 24. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 117.
 25. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 214.
 26. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 254.
 27. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), pp. 260-1.
 28. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), p. 76.
 29. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, pp. 13-4.
 30. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 10.
 31. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 254.
 32. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 11.
 33. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 12.
 34. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 11.
 35. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 12.
 36. Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, p. 261.
 37. Fritz Rorig, *The Medieval Town* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967), p. 169.
 38. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 62.
 39. Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea, 1984), p. 25.
 40. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 10.
 41. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 11.
 42. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 12.
 43. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 12.
 44. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 13.
 45. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *A History of Women in the West: II—Silences of the Middle Ages*, gen. ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1992), p. 154.
 46. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 10.
 47. Rorig, *Medieval Town*, p. 173.
 48. Dinshaw and Wallace, *Cambridge Companion*, p. 193.
 49. Maureen Quilligan, “Allegory and the Textual Body: Female Authority in Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la Cité des Dames*,” in *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), pp. 272-300; p. 283.
 50. McLeod, “Poetics,” p. 44.
 51. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: U of Chicago P, 1966), p. 7.
 52. Betsy McCormick, “Building the Ideal City: Female Memorial Praxis in Christine de Pizan’s *Cité des Dames*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36.1 (Spring 2003): 149-71, p. 149.

53. McCormick, "Building the Ideal City," p. 153.
54. Enders, "Feminist Mnemonics," p. 239.
55. Klapisch-Zuber, *History of Women*, p. 441.
56. Margarete Zimmermann, "Christine de Pizan: Memory's Architect," in *A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altmann and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 57-77; p. 68.
57. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, pp. 4 & 5.
58. Eric Hicks, "Excerpts and Originality: Authorial Purpose in the *Fais et Bonnes Meurs*," in *Christine de Pizan 2000: Studies on Christine de Pizan in Honour of Angus J. Kennedy*, ed. John Campbell and Nadia Margolis (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 221-31; p. 221.
59. De Pizan, *City of Ladies*, p. 257.
60. Christine McWebb, "Female City Builders: Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* and Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*," *Magistra* 9.1 (Summer 2003): 52-71, pp. 52-3.