

# Christine de Pizan's Metaphoric Womb

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Mais la veue d'icelluy dit livre,  
tout soit il de nulle autorité,  
ot engendré en moy nouvelle pensee  
—Christine de Pizan, *Le livre de la cité des dames*

AS A MEDIEVAL WOMAN WRITER, Christine de Pizan (ca. 1364–1430) was in an unusual position which necessitated not only that she establish her authority as a vernacular writer, like her male counterparts, but also that she find a way to reconcile her scholarly activity with her sex.<sup>1</sup> The manner in which Christine handled her doubly problematic issue of authority, which is intimately linked to the question of identity, developed over the course of her oeuvre.<sup>2</sup>

The *Livre de la cité des dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*, 1405) constitutes a key stage in Christine's self-presentation as author.<sup>3</sup> It is my contention that Christine employs a metaphor of gestation and childbirth to represent her writing process as a means of establishing her authority specifically as a *female* writer. In so doing, she defends womanhood by demonstrating value and usefulness in the female reproductive system, thereby reclaiming the most important, symbolically meaningful, and common target of the misogynistic tradition. Her use of the womb metaphor, as I shall call it, constitutes a regendering of traditionally masculinist writing metaphors as a means of creating a place for herself within the world of letters.

The *Cité des dames* involves an overarching allegory whereby the book narrates the process of its own development. The opening rubrical lines of the work expressly signal this *mise en abyme*: “Cy commence le Livre de la Cité des Dames, duquel le premier chappitre parle pourquoy et par quel mouvement le dit livre fu fait” (1.1; 2:616; Here begins the Book of the City of Ladies, whose first chapter tells why and for what purpose this book was written). Christine presents the *Cité* autobiographically,

commencing with a prologue in which she portrays herself as protagonist reading in her study. This figure is visited by three allegorical ladies who ask her to construct a fortified city to house virtuous women.<sup>4</sup> The first of these, Lady Reason, will help Christine-protagonist build the foundation and walls; Lady Rectitude will then aid with the buildings and the streets; and lastly Lady Justice will assist with the roofs and populating the city. The construction of the City of Ladies figures the process of writing the *Book of the City of Ladies*. The text is divided into three sections which correspond to the three progressive stages of the construction of the city, and the fortified structure built to protect women represents the book's role as an intellectual defense of woman-kind. Therefore, the book equals the city equals Christine's defense of women. The task that Christine sets out for herself in the *Cité* is no less than the composition of a convincing and erudite response to the entire misogynistic scholarly tradition.

A reading scene like the one featured in the *Cité* was not uncommon in medieval prologues, although Christine's is unusual in that the figure engaged in this erudite activity is a woman. Tired from serious study, Christine-protagonist decides to take a break by reading some light poetry. She thus picks up a book she comes across, but which does not belong to her. Someone had loaned it to her with other texts. Upon reading the title, *Lamentations* by Matheolus, she becomes amused since she has heard that this work depicts women unfavorably. Before she can commence reading it, though, her mother calls her to dinner. Christine-protagonist thus sets the book aside until the following day. Her return to the book the following morning constitutes a second, qualitatively different beginning to the prologue. Whereas the first time she was studying serious texts, this time she focuses on a work that she intends as light reading. The effect of reading the *Lamentations*, however, is quite the opposite. Its misogyny plunges Christine-protagonist into a progressively worsening existential depression which culminates in her regretting being a woman. At this, her lowest point, she addresses a lament to God, blasphemously asking Him: "Helas! Dieux, pourquoy ne me faiz tu naistre au monde en masculin sexe, a celle fin que mes inclinacions fussent toutes a te mieulx servir et que je ne errasse en riens et fusse de si grant perfeccion comme homme masle ce dit estre?" (1.1; 2:621; Alas,

God, why did You not let me be born in the world as a man, so that all my inclinations would be to serve You better, and so that I would not stray in anything and would be as perfect as a man is said to be?). She terms her address to God “*ma lamantacion*” (1.1; 2:621; my lament), which echoes the title of the book by Matheolus, the source of her grief.

Part two of the prologue commences with God’s response to Christine-protagonist’s lament: he sends three allegorical figures to console her. As she looks downward in grief, she suddenly sees a light appear on her lap. She raises her head to see three women standing before her. Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice announce that she has been chosen by God to undertake the defense of women. Since this apology is the *Cité des dames* itself, the annunciation of this project to the protagonist functions as a third beginning of the *Cité*.

Of course, proving that she was qualified for such a monumental undertaking by establishing her authority as an erudite woman writer would be requisite for Christine. In the *Cité*, she does so by means of a twofold process. First, like medieval male writers, she establishes her erudition, primarily through demonstrating knowledge of the classical *auctores*. Second, Christine grounds her authority in her personal experience, specifically her female body. This move is ingenious precisely because the female sex was often maligned in the literature of her day, both classical and medieval. The association of women with the body was meant to demonstrate their inferiority as compared to men, who were linked with the intellect. In the *Cité*, Christine takes up this dichotomy of man/mind versus woman/body and refigures it in a new way. She does not simply invert the hierarchy. In fact, she does not argue against either of these two gender paradigms. Rather, her model extends the intellect to women as well. She thus counters the misogynistic commonplace that excludes women from intellectual activity with a more complex concept of womanhood.

Christine carefully and consistently depicts both aspects of the female sex (capacity for intellect and relation to the body) by demonstrating her authority in terms of bookishness and her female body. Her authority functions in two spheres: among learned men and among all women. Both of these groups constituted her contemporary audience since she addresses women directly in the *Cité* and scholarly men indirectly. I

would argue that scholarly men, as the literati of the medieval age, always constituted a target audience for public medieval writing. Certainly, Christine's defense of women in the *Cité* was intended for this group as well. It would be reductionist to correlate each component of Christine's establishment of authority with a single, sexed target audience (bookishness with scholarly men and the body with women); rather, her authority as an integrated concept applies in both circles.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Livre de la mutacion de fortune* (The book of fortune's transformation, 1403), which predated the *Cité*, Christine's solution to her doubly problematic issue of authority was to present herself, in terms of Ovidian metamorphosis, as a man. As scholars such as Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski have noted, this metaphoric sex change coincides with an important episode in the author's personal life, when she had to adopt the "man's" role of provider for her family upon the premature death of her husband.<sup>6</sup> Blumenfeld-Kosinski notes that Christine reluctantly remains a man from her husband's death, figured by Christine-protagonist's transformation in the *Mutacion*, until the beginning of the *Cité*.<sup>7</sup> The prologue of this latter work thus begins with an issue of authority that is even further problematized. In the *Cité*, Christine-author finds a new means of resolving once and for all her initial problem of authority as a learned, female writer in the vernacular. In order to do so she must first reclaim the female body she relinquished in the *Mutacion*.

In the *Cité*, Christine's solution to the problem of authority and identity is not simply to trade her figurative male identity for one grounded in the femaleness of her actual sex. It is my contention that Christine presents instead an ingeniously crafted and multifaceted metaphor of the development of human life in the womb. In this way, she cleverly exploits an attribute unique to her sex: the ability to conceive and bear children.

The womb metaphor functions on several different levels. First, it involves a scene of metaphoric conception within a space that is emblematic of a womb in section one of the prologue (I.I). Second, it constitutes another dimension of the global book/city/defense allegory of Christine-author's project in two ways. The manner in which Christine represents conception and gestation, via the metaphor, serves as a rewriting of the prevailing misogynistic theories of these processes and therefore comprises a component of Christine's overall revisionist project with regard

to gender. Moreover, Christine's defense of women, coterminous with the book and city in terms of the global allegory, is what develops in the figurative womb. A third aspect of the womb metaphor is that it contributes to the thrice repeated beginning of the *Cité*, which corresponds to: (1) the actual beginning of the text, when the protagonist is working in her study and is interrupted by her mother's call to dinner (1.1); (2) the next day, when she finally has the opportunity to read the misogynistic book by Matheolus (1.1); and (3) the annunciation to Christine-protagonist by the three allegorical ladies of her divinely ordained task to undertake the defense of women (1.2). All of these passages feature an intrusion into the protagonist's study by an outside presence. Moreover, each echoes and announces the other two.

Christine's point of departure for the womb metaphor is the book-as-child topos where literary creation is likened to gestation and parturition.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, a long and arduous process of creation results in something that will endure beyond the lifespan of the creator as a privileged attempt at earthly immortality, that is, being remembered after death. Whereas for men the metaphor of childbirth can only be figurative, Christine capitalizes on the fact that for her, as a woman, it is rooted in literal, corporeal experience. Indeed, since Christine was a mother, her use of this metaphor is all the more powerful. Although Christine-author is at once mother and daughter, Christine-protagonist is only depicted as a daughter. This foregrounds her figurative motherly role in the *Cité* as the erudite author of the book/city/defense.

Christine's version of the book-as-child topos, the womb metaphor, serves to connect the two foundations of her authority, her intellect/bookishness and her female body. It is important to note that these two concepts were considered by the masculinists of her day to be mutually exclusive. She thus valorizes women and refutes the misogynistic view of womankind as presented in scholarly and literary writing by appropriating and refiguring—regendering—a figure heretofore dominated by men.

Maureen Quilligan's study of illumination programs in manuscripts featuring the *Cité* has uncovered a provocative substitution of a book for the body of Jesus, a take on the correlation of his body with the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Quilligan relates this paradigm to the hagiography

in book three of the *Cité* (stressing its connection to corporeal sacrifice and its demonstration of the link between flesh and word, particularly in terms of reading the martyr's body as a text), it is my opinion that the Jesus/book relationship is applicable to the global allegory of the *Cité* as well. It underscores the womb metaphor in that the equation of Jesus with the book parallels the notion that the defense of women develops in the figurative womb. Moreover, the Jesus/book link dovetails into another biblical reference present in the *Cité* prologue.

As V. A. Kolve has established, the *Cité* includes a key Marian intertext which informs the global allegory of the work as a whole. Kolve focuses on the scene in section two of the prologue where Christine-protagonist is visited by the three allegorical ladies who announce that she has been chosen by God to undertake the defense of women, which coincides with the construction of the city/book. Kolve demonstrates that to consider this passage iconographically reveals that the Annunciation to Mary that she had been selected to carry God's child serves as subtext for Christine's annunciation scene.<sup>10</sup> Kolve explains that medieval Marian iconography illustrated the divine Annunciation with a ray of light that seemed to come from nowhere and which usually shone on Mary's breast, head, or ear. He goes on to say that illustrations sometimes normalized the light by depicting it as coming through a window, though as emanating from God, not the sun. "It was a commonplace of popular devotion that just as light passes through glass without altering it, so does the miracle of Christ's conception leave Mary's virginity unviolated."<sup>11</sup> The annunciation to Christine-protagonist is similar in that the light also comes from no identifiable source, but differs since it shines on her lap (*giron*), a locus symbolic of conception and parturition. Kolve rightly points out that this detail of the lap invites comparison with "the equation of pen and phallus in the *Roman de la Rose*, where writing is thought of as essentially a phallic act."<sup>12</sup> Christine further rewrites the Annunciation in presenting it as an event in which only women participate: whereas in the Bible the angel who makes the Annunciation to Mary is identified as Gabriel, in Christine's version God's intercessors are the female allegorical ladies.<sup>13</sup> The Annunciation intertext then suggests a correlation between the penning of the *Cité des dames* and parturition, thereby

recalling the book-as-child topos. However, Christine employs it in a uniquely female context.<sup>14</sup>

The Bible is one of two important intertexts alluded to in the *Cité's* prologue. Christine was intimately familiar with Dante's works, as is apparent from several direct references in her oeuvre. Kevin Brownlee has demonstrated that Christine, who was Italian-born, knew Dante's texts in the original Italian. He has worked extensively on Christine's use of Dante as literary model and significantly notes that "Christine's *Chemin de long estude* is the first serious reading—the first *rifacimento*—of Dante's *Commedia* in French literature."<sup>15</sup> The *Chemin de long estude* (1402-1403) predates the *Cité des dames*. Given Christine's knowledge of Dante and her use of his *Divina Commedia* as literary model for the *Chemin*, it seems highly likely that Christine would have used the *Commedia* as her point of reference for the process of conception and human development in the *Cité*.

In *Purgatorio* 25 of the *Commedia*, Statius explains embryology to Dante—protagonist in response to the latter's query regarding how the gluttonous shades in Cantos 23-24 have come to grow lean.<sup>16</sup> Dante's interpretation of this process comprises part of a masculinist tradition of embryology tracing from Aristotle, the key reference for medieval theories of human reproduction. Dante's specific point of departure is Albertus Magnus.<sup>17</sup> This Aristotelian masculinist tradition ascribes all active power to the male component in procreation and depicts the female contribution as the inert material that provides the matter to be transformed by the male seed.

Dante's Statius begins by stating that sperm, which originates as "perfect blood" and becomes purified in the heart, encompasses the potential for all of the body parts.<sup>18</sup> This prominence that Dante's account accords to the heart is not surprising since, in medieval times, that organ held great importance, especially in that it was considered to be the seat of the mind.<sup>19</sup>

The sperm then, further digested, descends to the genitals from which it drops on the woman's blood in the "natural vessel."<sup>20</sup> As in Aristotle's embryology, all active generation is attributed to the male component, whereas the female only contributes matter for the sperm to transform. The female matter does however contribute something

to the process—its generative potential. This formulation of conception epitomizes the active-passive dichotomy typical of classical and medieval notions of reproduction, which served to reinforce and justify gender roles.

At this point the embryo is likened to a plant. Dante further emphasizes the active power of the male seed and the notion that it contains the potential for the entire new being by explaining that the force which originated in the heart, the “perfect place,” develops and spreads. This male power is the active force which drives the embryo’s development from vegetative to animal-like state.

The transition from this animal-like state to humanity is effected by the “First Mover.” “When the formative virtue, which for Dante *becomes* the vegetative and subsequently the animal soul, rather than simply functioning as an agent in the process, as in the account of Albertus Magnus, has completed its articulation of the physical organs through which the inner and outer senses operate, God turns to the work of Nature.”<sup>21</sup> He breathes a soul into the emergent being.<sup>22</sup> This soul, whose existence began in the father’s heart, will separate from the body upon death and persist eternally. Thus concludes the passage on embryology.

The gestation metaphor in the *Livre de la cité des dames* generally follows Dante’s model of embryology yet refigures it, as representative of the masculinist version, in a way that valorizes the female contribution. I postulate that the prologue to the *Cité* begins with a description of Christine-protagonist’s study which evokes both a womb and, more specifically, the interpretation of female generative matter as presented in *Purgatorio* 25. The metaphoric conception in 1.1 of the prologue refigures the Annunciation intertext that occurs in 1.2.

The opening scene of the *Cité*’s prologue takes place within a space that is depicted like a womb. Christine-protagonist is surrounded by her books as if enclosed in a protective space, an impression which is underscored by the use of the word *celle* to denote her study: “Selonc la maniere que j’ay en usage, et a quoy est disposé le exercice de ma vie: c’est assavoir en la frequentacion d’estude de lettres, un jour comme je fusse seant en ma celle avironnee de plusieurs volumes de diverses mateires” (1.1; 2:616; One day as I was sitting alone in my study [cell] surrounded by books on all kinds of subjects, devoting myself to literary studies, my

usual habit [parenthetical addition mine]).<sup>23</sup> The fact that these are the first words of the body of the *Cité* underscores, I suggest, the importance of the womb metaphor—the image of Christine-protagonist enclosed within the space of her study with books surrounding her like a secure wall is what the reader/audience first encounters.<sup>24</sup> The correlation between the book/city/defense and womb metaphors is underscored in the parallel between the presentation of the study as a cell and the impenetrable walls of the City of Ladies.

Christine-protagonist's study further resembles a womb in that it is depicted as dark. The darkness contrasts with the impending literal and metaphoric illumination—the ray of light which coincides with the arrival of the allegorical ladies and thus the annunciation to the protagonist. This light figures the divine provenance and nature of their request as well as its spiritually and intellectually illuminative effects on Christine-protagonist. The fact that the protagonist marvels that the Ladies were able to penetrate her closed study alludes to the Virgin Birth of Jesus, which points to the womb metaphor:<sup>25</sup>

soubdainement sus mon giron vy descendre un ray de lumiere si  
comme se le soleil fust. Et je, qui en lieu obscur estoye, ouquel a  
celle heure soleil rayer ne peust, tressailly adoncques si comme se je  
fusse resveillee de somme. . . . Lors, se je fus esmerveillee, nul nel  
demant, considerant sur moy les huys clos et elles la venues. (1.2;  
2:621-22)

[I suddenly saw a ray of light fall on my lap, as though it were the sun. I shuddered then, as if wakened from sleep, for I was sitting in a shadow where the sun could not have shone at that hour. . . . Now no one would ask whether I was surprised, for my doors were shut and they had still entered.]

This metaphoric awakening also figures the generative effect that the incorporation of the “male semen” will have on the protagonist.

There is much emphasis on the regularity and habitualness of the protagonist's scholarly activity, which serves to establish Christine-author's authority and also contributes to the womb metaphor. The

description of female generative material by Dante's Statius, in keeping with the Aristotelian version, stresses that its value lies in its potential. It is described as inert matter whose worth is only realized if and when it is acted upon by male semen which changes and develops it. The *Cité's* prologue initially creates a similar setup. Christine-protagonist is depicted as habitually present and engaged in study in her *celle*. This scholarly work is the necessary precursor to her penning the book/defense, which is what develops in the figurative womb. However, it only prepares for this creation; it does not enact it.

The association of Christine-protagonist with her study, demonstrated by her regular presence therein, serves three functions in terms of the womb metaphor. First, it underscores the identification of the space as female. Normally the medieval study is coded as masculine. Second, it serves to delineate the correlative components of the womb metaphor. It differentiates between Christine-protagonist, who represents the female generative material, and what develops in the womb. Third, and most importantly, this relationship establishes the basis of Christine-author's rewriting of the masculinist model of conception. Whereas the womanly matter was traditionally considered to be inert, Christine instead ascribes agency to the female role in the gestation process.

In terms of the narrative flow of the *Cité* and the book/city/defense metaphor, in other words, at the literal level of plot and at the level of the basic allegory of the text, Christine-protagonist happens upon a misogynistic book in her study, which plunges her into a deep depression at the lowest point of which she laments having been born a woman. Despite the misogynistic text's immediate negative effects on the protagonist, as representative of its denigration of women in general, Christine-protagonist's reading of this work ultimately functions positively with regard to these same two parties since it prompts her to undertake the defense of women and thereby construct the city/book. With regard to the womb metaphor, Christine-protagonist's act of reading the misogynistic work unites the figurative female and male generative matter in a way that attributes the active role to the female component. The word choice in this passage demonstrates this correlation to a remarkable extent:

Mais la veue d'icelluy dit livre, tout soit il de nulle autorité, *ot engendré en moy nouvelle penssee* qui fist naistre en mon couraige grant admiracion, penssant quelle puet estre la cause, ne dont ce puet venir, que tant de divers hommes, clerks et autres, ont esté, et sont, sy enclins a dire de bouche et en leur traittiez et escrips tant de diableries et de vituperes de femmes et de leurs condicions (1.1; 2:617-18 [emphasis mine]).

[But just the sight of this book, even though it was of no authority, made me wonder how it happened (*engendered a new thought in me*, which *caused* great wonder *to be born [grow] in my heart/mind*) that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior (parenthetical addition mine).]

The fact that the protagonist considers Matheolus's text to figure misogynistic men in general mirrors Christine's role as defender of all women and demonstrates that Matheolus is meant to represent mankind, just as Christine-protagonist is emblematic of womankind, in terms of the biological/gestational function of their sex within the context of the womb metaphor. Moreover, this passage specifically states that the product of the metaphoric conception was a new mode of thinking (*nouvelle penssee*), which ultimately correlates with Christine's defense of women (=the city/book). Christine's use of the term *couraige* (heart/mind) here directly parallels Dante's description of male semen being formed in the heart and constitutes an essential aspect of her formulation of an anti-misogynistic version of conception.

The manner in which the prologue introduces the *Lamentations* by Matheolus contributes to the womb metaphor in that it carefully describes the book as a foreign element which is fortuitously introduced into Christine-protagonist's study: "entre mains me vint *d'aventure* un livre *estrange, nom mie de mes volumes*, qui avec autres livres *m'avoit esté baillié* si comme en garde" (1.1; 2:616 [emphasis mine]; *By chance a strange volume came into my hands, not one of my own, but one which had been given to me along with some others.* [emphasis mine]). Moreover, the

use of the word *garde* recalls the earlier term *celle* to describe the study and thus evokes the image of the protective space of the womb. Her study is not penetrated; as in Mary's Virgin Birth of Jesus, Christine-protagonist's figurative insemination takes place by other means. She introduces the male component herself, though unknowingly, which deprives it of agency in the sexual act necessary to conception. The fact that Christine-protagonist's act of reading, rather than merely the introduction of the book into her study, figures the event of conception further stresses female agency in the metaphoric act of reproduction. The *Cité* presents both the male and female generative matter, figured by Matheolus's book and Christine-protagonist, as more or less inert until she elects to read the book. Christine-protagonist's active role in enacting this figurative conception eliminates the potential for violence which was present in contemporary masculinist literary depictions of copulation.<sup>26</sup> One could speculate that Christine thus presents a consensual model of the sex act to rival the aggressive, rapeful paradigm of the masculinist tradition.

Christine's limited and delayed use of Matheolus's name downplays his role in the reproductive process and underscores her agency.<sup>27</sup> She further de-emphasizes the importance of his book in noting that it was only one of several and that it was merely light poetry. Christine's rendition of conception as presented in the *Cité*'s prologue stands counter to the Dantean/Aristotelian model with regard to agency in that it restricts the male and expands the female contribution. She depicts *both* male and female generative matter as initially ripe with potential, though inert, until the moment when Christine-protagonist joins them via her act of reading. All subsequent gestational activity is coded as female since it is actively executed by Christine-protagonist under the auspices of the allegorical ladies. Christine thus recasts the reproductive process, emphasizing the generative activity that takes place after conception and within the womb.

It is interesting to note that the etymology of the name Matheolus relates to the biblical dimension of the womb metaphor. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this name ultimately traces from the Hebrew for "gift of Yahweh."<sup>28</sup> Christine's choice of misogynistic author then

points to the parallel between the womb metaphor and the Virgin Birth of Jesus, each indicating a divinely sanctioned conception.

Christine-protagonist first only briefly encounters the text by Matheolus. The figurative act of conception, which occurs when she later reads this book, is delayed by a significant interruption by the protagonist's mother. The way in which the mother's interruption is narrated relates to the gestation metaphor: "je fus appellé[e] de la bonne mere qui me porta pour prendre la reffeccion du soupper dont l'eure estoit ja venue" (1.1; 2:617; I was called by the good mother who bore me to nourish myself with supper whose time had come [translation mine]).<sup>29</sup> Within the context of this metaphor, this last phrase (*dont l'eure estoit ja venue*) suggests that the female generative matter, as figured by Christine-protagonist, was ready for the gestation process to be initiated, which underscores its ripe potential. Furthermore the redundant *qui me porta* (who bore me), since she has already been termed a mother, points to the gestation metaphor, emphasizing childbirth and motherhood.

Christine-author's mother also figures later in the *Cité des dames*. It is noted that she discouraged Christine's education, which was espoused by the latter's father (2.36). The fact that the mother figure interrupts Christine-protagonist's studies by calling her to dinner reflects the author's mother's adversarial role to her education. In lieu of focusing on the mother's negative impact in the prologue, however, Christine turns her attention to the mother's nurturing, motherly qualities.

As is evident in the above citation, Christine's mother is associated with nourishment. This motherly act underscores the womb metaphor in that it figures the umbilical link.<sup>30</sup> At first glance one might be tempted to interpret this characterization as a simple reaffirmation of the misogynistic dichotomy that opposes man and the mind to woman and the body. Christine's text does invoke this commonplace, yet refigures it by casting the corporeal association in a positive light since it constitutes an element of the important theme of nourishment. The food, the text by Matheolus, and the annunciation by the allegorical ladies each figures an extrinsic component necessary to Christine's revisionist project (the book/city/defense). Each of the three beginnings to the *Cité* relates to a different level of nourishment. The first beginning, which includes

the mother's call to dinner, figures literal sustenance; the second, when the protagonist reads the misogynistic book, correlates with intellectual stimulus; and the third beginning, the annunciation by the three ladies, represents the spiritual sanction of God. All three components (literal, intellectual, and spiritual) are necessary for Christine-protagonist to accomplish this significant and difficult undertaking. It further stresses the belief in a spiritual component of any and all instances of literal conception, a belief that God ordains each, not just Mary's. Furthermore, it constitutes part of a larger argument implicitly present in the *Cité*, that God has ordained Christine's project.

The mother's interruption does delay the figurative conception and would therefore appear to function counter to the progression of the text and the development of the book/city/defense. It is, however, useful for several reasons. First, it constitutes a motherly act of consolation. The fact that the misogynistic text by Matheolus causes Christine-protagonist great distress is highlighted by the title of his work (*Lamentations*). Second, the interruption serves to slow down the narrative in order to delay the instance of the metaphoric conception, which emphasizes the importance of this moment.

The misogyny present in the work by Matheolus causes Christine-protagonist despair. The use of the term *ma lamantacion* to describe her state underscores that the process of her deepening grief was prompted by reading this text. The protagonist's depressed mood constitutes a metaphoric descent, much like the embryo according to the Dantean interpretation of gestation. The fact that Matheolus's text effects a decline in the protagonist's mood, a figurative descent, is paradoxical because she was expecting the opposite, that reading some light poetry ("aucune joyeuseté des dist des pouettes" 1.1; 2:616) would provide reprieve from the "weightiness" (*pesanteur*) of her serious studies. The contradiction extends to the global allegory of the text, including the womb metaphor, since this dramatic decline at the level of plot prompts the undertaking of the book/city/defense.

The mother's interruption intimates that an element necessary to the process of metaphoric conception is lacking: the spiritual component represented by the annunciation by the three allegorical ladies. This act corresponds to the moment when, according to Dante's Statius,

God breathes a soul into the developing embryo. In Christine's rendition, divine will is enacted by female agents. The fact that the ladies call Christine "fille" (daughter) points to the womb metaphor in that it stresses motherhood. In a Christian context, one would expect this epithet from God. While He ultimately authorizes all spiritual elements present in the *Cité des dames* as well as the book/city/defense itself, Christine depicts His will as being enacted by female intercessors. The ladies also fulfill a motherly role in comforting Christine.

The mother's interruption preemptively figures the annunciation. Once Christine-protagonist has received the three types of nourishment—the literal (motherly sustenance), intellectual (her scholarly preparation and the effect of reading misogynistic texts, such as *Lamentations* by Matheolus), and spiritual (divine ordination)—she can commence her project.<sup>31</sup>

Matheolus's text, like the *Roman de la rose*, indeed had a fruitful effect on Christine de Pizan; their misogyny incited her to prolific literary production. Christine's participation from 1401-1402 in the quarrel of the *Rose*, a public intellectual debate over the merits and misogyny of this work, immediately preceded her most productive period (1402-1410) and served to earn Christine renown, particularly as a defender of women.<sup>32</sup> As Maureen Quilligan has noted, Matheolus is not the primary target of Christine's anti-misogynistic invective in the *Cité*, a text that is in many ways a corrective to the *Rose* as well as other masculinist texts.<sup>33</sup> Scholars such as Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Quilligan have rightly demonstrated that Christine's closed and fortified City of Ladies serves as a response to Jean de Meun's rose. This flower serves as a symbol of both woman and her genitals, which ultimately reduces the former to the latter. Jean's rose is left vulnerable to a violent rape. Christine thus not only protects the *sexe féminin* (female sex) in penning an anti-misogynistic defense of women, but, in so doing, she also figuratively protects the *sexe féminin* (female genitals) from rape.<sup>34</sup> Whereas the masculinists focused on the possibility of penetrating (=invading) the female genitals, Christine instead underscores their generative, creative potential.

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1. I am indebted to Kevin Brownlee for his invaluable comments on this article and for suggesting *Purgatorio* 25 as a potential intertext. The terminology I employ with regard to sex and gender is that generally used by feminist, queer, and some gender theorists where the terms “sex,” “male,” and “female” denote biological difference as differentiated from “gender,” “masculine,” and “feminine” which refer to social/cultural/ideological constructs.

2. For more on “l’appropriation progressive d’autorité au moyen de l’écriture autobiographique [chez Christine]” ([Christine’s] progressive appropriation of authority by means of autobiographical writing [translation mine]) see Kevin Brownlee, “Le projet ‘autobiographique’ de Christine de Pizan: histoires et fables du moi,” in *Au champ des écritures: Actes du III<sup>e</sup> colloque international sur Christine de Pizan*, ed. Eric Hicks et al., *Études christiniennes*; 6 (Paris: Champion, 2000), 5-23; 8.

3. Citations are from Maureen Curnow, ed., *The “Livre de la cité des dames” of Christine de Pizan: A Critical Edition*, 3 vols. (Diss. Vanderbilt University, 1975). Translations are based on Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982). I employ the italicized and French term *Cité* to refer to the literary work and “City (of Ladies)” to denote the metaphoric city. I also make use of the helpful terminology (Christine-author and Christine-protagonist) used by Kevin Brownlee to distinguish between Christine’s different roles and representations. Furthermore, all mentions of just the name Christine refer to the author.

4. See Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s “Cité des dames”* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) for a cogent analysis of the allegory of the *Cité*.

5. I employ the term “sexed” to denote divided into groups according to sex.

6. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, ed., *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kevin Brownlee (New York: Norton, 1997), xii.

7. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, “Christine de Pizan and the Misogynistic Tradition,” *Romanic Review* 81 (1990): 279-92, esp. 292.

8. For more on this topos, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, c1953), 132-34. My use of the term “gestation” references the process of fetal development rather than the condition of being pregnant.

9. See Maureen Quilligan, “Allegory and the Textual Body: Female

Authority in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames*," *Romanic Review* 79 (1988): 222-48, esp. 235 and 238, for more on the book/Jesus substitution.

10. V. A. Kolve, "The Annunciation to Christine: Authorial Empowerment in The Book of the City of Ladies," in *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23-24 March 1990*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton, NJ: Dept. of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993), 172-96, esp. 179-80. Kolve notes that "Christine would have known one or more of these [medieval iconographic] Annunciation traditions" (180).

11. *Ibid.*, 179-80.

12. *Ibid.*, 180. The *Roman de la Rose* (*Romance of the Rose*) was a popular yet polemical thirteenth-century misogynistic text that Christine vehemently opposed and to which the *Cité* responds. Later in the *Cité's* prologue, Christine includes another revision to a classical misogynistic metaphor that figures both the act of writing and the process of reproductive conception. The topos in question is the image of a plow furrowing a field, whereby the plow is symbolic of a phallic act of dominance. Christine rewrites and regenders this metaphor in the following directive from Lady Reason to Christine-protagonist: "Prens la pioche de ton entendement et fouys fort et faiz grant fosse tout partout ou tu verras les traces de ma ligne" (1.8; 2:639; Take the pick of your understanding and dig and clear out a great ditch wherever you see the marks of my ruler). Christine thus places the generative instrument (the pick, which represents the both the stylus and the active agent in reproduction) in the hands of a woman. The refiguring of this classical commonplace underscores Christine's association of intelligence with women.

13. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), s.v. "Virgin Birth of Christ."

14. For more on the Annunciation intertext in the *Cité*, see also Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, "Fondements et fondations de l'écriture chez Christine de Pizan," in *City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. Margerete Zimmermann and Dina De Rentiis (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 79-96. Cerquiglini-Toulet treats writing metaphors throughout Christine's oeuvre.

15. For more on Christine and Dante, see Kevin Brownlee, "Literary Genealogy and the Problem of the Father: Christine de Pizan and Dante," in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 205-35, 206.

16. My reading of Dante is based on the text of Giorgio Petrocchi as found in the edition by Charles S. Singleton, as well as Singleton's translation. *La Divina Commedia*, ed. C. H. Grandgent, rev. Charles S. Singleton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939). My reading of this Canto is also informed by the article by Ronald Martinez "Status's Marvelous Connection of Things," in *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*, ed. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, and Charles Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 277-87. I would like to thank Lorenzo Valterza for this reference. The summary and interpretation I provide is not meant to be a comprehensive representation of Dante's embryology; I only include what is relevant to the present study.

17. Singleton's edition of *Purgatorio* includes a commentary (v. 2, pt. 2) in which he discusses Dante's use of Aristotle and Albertus Magnus citing Bruno Nardi's study *Dal "Convivio" alla "Commedia"*, (Rome: Nella sede dell'Istituto, 1960). Ronald Martinez, also summarizing Nardi, succinctly states that the embryology in *Purgatorio* 25 follows that of Albertus Magnus (278).

18. Sangue perfetto, che poi non si beve  
da l'assetate vene, e si rimane  
quasi alimento che di mensa leve,  
prende nel core a tutte membra umane  
virtute informativa, come quello  
ch'a farsi quelle per le vene vane. (37-42)

[The perfect blood, which never is drunk by the thirsty veins and is left behind as it were food which one removes from the table, acquires in the heart an informing power for all the bodily members, like that blood which flows through the veins to become those members.]

19. Heather Webb, for example, notes: "Much of what the medieval world attributed to the heart we now attribute to the brain." Heather Webb, *The Medieval Heart* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 9.

20. Ancor digesto, scende ov'è più bello  
tacer che dire; e quindi poscia geme  
sovr' altrui sangue in natural vasello.  
Ivi s'accoglie l'uno e l'altro insieme,  
l'un disposto a patire, e l'altro a fare  
per lo perfetto loco onde si preme;  
e, giunto lui, comincia ad operare  
coagulando prima, e poi avvia  
ciò che per sua matera fè constare. (46-51)

[Digested yet again, it descends there whereof to be silent is more seemly than to speak; and thence afterwards drops upon other's blood, in natural vessel. There the one is mingled with the other, one designed to be passive, the other to be active, by reason of the perfect place whence it springs; and, conjoined with the former, the latter begins to operate, first by coagulating, then by quickening that to which it has given consistency to serve as its material.]

21. Martinez, "Stattius's Marvelous Connection," 278.

22. . . . sì tosto come al feto  
l'articular del cerebro è perfetto,  
lo motor primo a lui si volge lieto  
sopra tant' arte di natura, e spira  
spirito novo, di virtù repleto,  
che ciò che trova attivo quivi, tira  
in sua sustanzia, e fassi un'alma sola,  
che vive e sente e sé in sé rigira. (68-75)

[. . . so soon as in the foetus the articulation of the brain is perfect, the First Mover turns to it with joy over such art of nature, and breathes into it a new spirit replete with virtue, which absorbs that which is active there into its own substance, and makes one single soul which lives and feels and circles on itself.]

23. Earl Jeffrey Richards notes that Christine's use of the term *celle* is "perhaps deliberately evocative of the *libraria cella*, the book-lined cell, of early Italian women humanists." Earl Jeffrey Richards, "'Seulette a part'—The 'Little Woman on the Sidelines' Takes Up Her Pen: The Letters of Christine de Pizan," in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 154.

24. I employ both terms "reader" and "audience" to include those who would read the *Cité des dames*, medieval through modern, and the contemporary audience who would have listened to it being read aloud as we believe was common medieval practice.

25. In accordance with Catholic terminology, I use the expression "Virgin Birth" for Jesus's birth, since "Immaculate Conception" is reserved for Mary's. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, s.v. "Virgin Birth of Christ."

26. The *Roman de la Rose* is an important example of a medieval text which includes an extremely violent misogynistic depiction of the sex act.

27. Christine does not name Matheolus until after the citation which describes his book (quoted above).

28. This etymology is found in the entry for the adjective *Matthean* and reads as follows: < post-classical Latin *Matthaeus* Matthew (Vulgate; < Hellenistic Greek *Ματθαῖος*, variant (with change of suffix) of *Μαθθίας* Matthias (Acts 1:23), shortened < *Ματταθίας* Mattathias (Septuagint; also Luke 3.25) < Hebrew *Mattityāb* Mattithiah (1 Chron. 9:31), *Mattityābū* (1 Chron. 15:21), lit. ‘gift of Yahweh’). <http://www.oed.com>.

29. The bracketed *e* is copied here as it appears in Curnow’s edition.

30. The body of the *Cité*, especially in part three, includes several important scenes featuring breastfeeding and lactation. Most notable are the following episodes: the daughter who breastfeeds her starved mother in order to save her life (2.11); and the female saints in part 3 who, during their martyrdom, emit milk from their wounds in lieu of blood.

31. The number three figures prominently in the *Cité des dames*. Namely, the three allegorical ladies reflect the Holy Trinity, and the three sections of the work imitate the overarching structure of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*.

32. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Selected Writings*, xiii.

33. Quilligan, “Allegory and the Textual Body,” 223.

34. Christine employs the term *sexe feminin* twice in the *Cité des dames* prologue in her apostrophe to God (1.1). Her later *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* (1429) also includes a provocative enjambement of this term:

Hee! Quell honneur au femenin

Sexe! (34, 265-66)

(Oh! What honour for the female sex!)

Angus J. Kennedy and Kenneth Varty, eds. *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc*. Medium Aevum Monographs, n.s., 9 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1977).