

The Book of the Mutability of Fortune by Christine de Pizan. Edited and translated by Geri L. Smith. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 52. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 514. Toronto: Iter Press, 2017. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017. Pp. 294. ISBN: 978-0-86698-570-3 paperback).

Written in 1403, Christine de Pizan's *Book of the Mutability of Fortune* is her first important historical text and her longest work up to that point in her literary career, a narrative poem of almost 24,000 lines of octosyllabic couplets divided into seven parts (with a brief prose interlude) that recount within an allegorical framework world history from Adam and Eve to Christine's day. The book has received far less attention from critics than the *Cité des Dames*, the *Livre des Trois Vertus*, or Christine's letters on the *Roman de la Rose*, all of which have been edited recently and translated into modern French and English. Suzanne Solente's edition from 1959 (for volumes 1 and 2) and 1966 (volumes 3 and 4) remains the only modern edition of the *Mutability of Fortune*. Selected passages have appeared in print over the past twenty years, but Smith's translation, although abridged, is the "first start to finish incarnation of this poem in any language other than Middle French" (23).

As this fine translation makes clear, *The Mutability of Fortune* deserves to be better known. The preliminary section (the part most often translated and anthologized) contains a remarkable autobiographical portrait describing the time that Christine "turned into a man" after the death of her husband, so that she could manage household affairs and defend her estate in court. But equally impressive about the *Mutability* is the way that Christine's sense of herself as an accomplished author and engaged moralist grows throughout this work. Drawing upon a range of learned sources (among them, the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* and the *Ovide moralisé*), Christine recasts historical and mythological exempla to illustrate points about the vicissitudes of destiny and the vicious or virtuous ways that individuals meet their fate.

The seven books of *Mutability* retell world history from the perspective of the allegorical figures of Fortune and Mischance, who direct social and political events, capriciously bestowing blessings and maledictions on prominent players seemingly at whim. Christine describes the confusion and injustice of reality as a dangerous vortex, where the good and loyal are often placed at the bottom, and the foolish and evil at the top. Fortune's castle is guarded by figures who represent various aspects of her character: luck, hope, evil, poverty, envy and

wealth. Christine's social allegory provides a way to think through the problem of injustice, to understand why some undeserving people live in luxury and other good folks have nothing.

In *Mutability*, Christine hones rhetorical skills and arguments that she will put to use in the *Cité des Dames* (1405), where she defends women against charges of intellectual and moral inferiority. Many of the same women appear in both works, cast in a different light. The Amazons who suffer mistreatment and take revenge in *Mutability* are portrayed as examples of female strength in the *Cité*. Foreshadowing her heroic exemplum in the later book, Judith boldly beheads Holofernes in *Mutability* to save the Jews (137). In *Mutability's* attack on slanderers, Christine singles out in particular those who slander women (92); such misogynists will be strongly castigated in the *Cité*. She observes that women are particularly subject to "unfortunate fates," as in her own case (107), and maintains that although some women act badly, their distance from government means that they cannot do much harm (103). As a rule, for Christine, "the majority of women are free of perverse and ugly morals" (104). As Christine reviews the historical record, she observes a pattern of abuse of women that will come sharply into focus in the *Cité des dames*.

Smith offers students and anglophone scholars a tremendous service by bringing forth such a skillfully translated and well-annotated work. Smith's introduction offers succinct discussion of the political context of a work written in the midst of the Hundred Years War, a decade after the madness of Charles VI had declared itself, a few years before the assassination of Louis d'Orléans, the King's brother, in 1407, during the period of intense rivalry between the Armagnac (Orléanist) and Burgundian factions for control of the throne. Smith emphasizes the author's originality as a woman writer and as a humanist. Her remarks are well informed by the massive scholarship on Christine, yet she does not allow her explanations to get bogged down in academic disputes. She helpfully provides references for eleven different topics arranged thematically in an Appendix: ie.g., "Christine's Self-Construction as a Gendered Authorial Persona" (246); "Discussions of Fortune in Medieval Literature" (251). There is a bibliography of manuscripts, editions, and translations of Christine's corpus, and of primary and secondary sources, as well as an index that allows for easy location of persons and places.

Smith has chosen prose rather than verse for her translation, and she frequently divides Christine's lengthy sentences into more manageable chunks, detangling complicated syntax and clarifying ambiguities. Spot-checking of several passages suggests that Smith's choices as a translator are prudent and

judicious, made with the aim of clarifying the meaning for the reader. For example, the opening passage, a single seventeen-line phrase, has been presented in four sentences that retain much of the energy of the original. In deference to Christine's formal register, Smith has avoided overly modern colloquial expressions (as she explains on p. 26), but her style is by no means flat. She appropriately conveys Christine's outrage at abuse and her skills as a storyteller.

Most helpfully, Smith includes more than three hundred explanatory notes for literary figures, sources, and historical personae and events, displayed at the bottom of the appropriate page for ease of use. The notes are culled from Solente's extensive annotations (which are presented at the back of each of her four volumes) and enhanced by references to recent scholarship. Although Solente's notes remain indispensable for scholars, Smith's concise explanations provide an excellent guide for students.

A fine translation such as this one can revive scholarship on a lesser-known text, as has happened with translations of Christine's works into modern French and English over the last twenty years. Translations by Earl Jeffrey Richards, Charity Cannon Willard, Sarah Lawson, Andrea Tarnowski, Thérèse Moraud and Eric Hicks, Thelma Fenster, David Hult, Karen Green, Constance Mews, and Janice Pindar among others, have not only made Christine's diverse *oeuvre* more accessible to a broader audience of students and scholars for whom Christine's Middle French might prove an obstacle; these translations have also spurred further work among specialists, who have benefitted from renewed interest in their areas of research. Geri Smith's carefully annotated and engaging translation stands poised to bring deserved attention from students and increased scrutiny from scholars to Christine de Pizan's fascinating *Mutability of Fortune*. With Smith's translation, *The Mutability of Fortune* can claim its rightful place as an important transformational work in Christine's evolving literary corpus.

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