CARNIVAL, II: ON THE LIGHTER SIDE OF MEDIEVAL FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

INVENTING CHRISTINE: OR, HOW THE ROSE WAS WON

A recently-acquired manuscript, now in Paris, catalogued as Bibliotheque nationale de France nouv. acq. lat. 50053, was originally discovered amidst the sparse, charred remains after the fire in 1940 of the Archives du Loiret. From there it was taken to a chapel at Meun-sur-Loire, and secretly revered, since the manuscript contains, among other writings pertaining to the posterity of that town’s native son, Jean de Meun, letters and fragments from outside the famous dossier relative to the Debat sus le Rommani de la Rose. Thanks to the kindness of the BNF staff, we have gained access to these previously unknown letters by Christine de Pizan, Jean de Montreuil, and Gontier and Pierre Col. As is by now familiar to many, this Debate of the Romance of the Rose became the first Querelle des femmes, or feminist v. misogynist debate, in a tradition that would later emerge as the hallmark of French polemical writing in numerous future literary debates and studies. This controversy would also rank as an important phase in the history of gender issues. Yet the Rose Debate has nonetheless remained unresolved. Because we feel that these heretofore unknown letters may shed new light on the debate’s conclusion and aftermath, we have translated them below.

Paris, 12 Dec. 1404

My dear Montreuil,

That hibernal old man with his dreary, damp days is enveloping us again. Except for Boreas’ icy gusts, nothing moves but the speed of night’s darkness. I hope you are well nonetheless. Despite plenty of work to do, especially now that I’m royal treasurer, I am bored. It’s time, I think, to devise another game amongst ourselves. It would even be fun to resuscitate her, perhaps not as a continuation of this blasted debate, of which we creatures real and false have collectively tired—even Gerson (it’s been a year since his letter to Pierre; can’t believe the Chancellor never caught on that “Christine” was a phony!)—but in other modes of writing that will seem to defend the weaker sex while actually preserving our nice little world.

I recall your trying to solicit help from poets whose pens strike like darts for political goals more that to re-create Cupid’s pangs—Deschamps, Tignonville, Bouvet, Clamanges—to little or no avail against Gerson & co.? (That “tu” business was brilliant, by the way; couldn’t leave it alone, could you?) None—
not even old Deschamps, with his occasional guise of misogyny—wished to play. No one has any sense of humor these days to lighten up the tedium of our professional lives.4

We thus had to invent her ourselves, to deflect Gerson's attacks on us. For verisimilitude, we had to argue with and even insult her—and even have her take offense over the familiarity thing as a misogynistic slur. Were you slyly twitting Clamanges, by the way, I mean, after that brilliant rheto-maniac got carried away and not only presumed to advise the new pope but also to address him as tu, claiming that to be a sign of respect in classical-humanistic circles? At least it was the Avignon pope, Benedict XIII, so he’s kept it in the family, as it were. Word has it some of His Holiness’s courtiers, jealous of this learned upstart’s growing favor with the pope, made up that letter to sabotage his chances.5

And then, in our little Debate on the Rose, we let Christine have the last word.6

But I’m not sure Pierre acquitted himself properly in his last missive to Christine this past month. Yes, his anger was credible, but unbecoming for a man of his station (how fortunate that he left that rant unfinished!).

Moreover I doubt our venerable Monsieur de Meun suffered any real damage to his reputation in the wake of our little game. No indeed! In fact, I ran into Jacques the Copyist just the other day on the rue de la Parcheminerie and he says there’s been a sudden huge demand for Roman de la Rose manuscripts, especially the kind with racy miniatures.7 We’ll also have to be even more subtle than Boccaccio in his De mulieribus claris, whose tongue protrudeth too mightily from within his cheek!

Anyway, it might be an amusing thing to do over the coming cold winter months. By the way, is Orléans putting on another “Order of the Rose” bash at his hôtel soon as he has before in January?8

And what news of the real Christine, that diligent little widowed scribe with delusions of being a great poet, source of your inspiration?

Yours,
Gontier

Paris, 15 Dec. 1404

My dear Gontier,

As for possibly continuing “the game,” it would be fun to do more opuscula gallica, and even in a woman’s voice. But here at the chancery, we have little opportunity to compose in anything but high Latin, even in our supposed otium,
with this latter commodity shrinking as the Schism and negotiations to stave off the English threat continue to heat up. I’ve just returned from Avignon: damn those Italians anyway! They’re worse than the English, since we don’t have to worry about a culture war with the latter (their only weapon on that score would be heartburn or constipation from their atrocious cuisine!). In a way, each of our adversaries, England and Italy, necessitates both levels of war: with sword, or at least diplomatic seal, and pen—if in different ways. That is where we notaries come in, and I expect to be occupied with much tract-writing against both enemies, albeit on separate levels. Clamanges is our star rhetor and knows it, hence I can’t help but tease him.

But there are two things our gifted but paranoid friend Clamanges never understood concerning how we French might compete with the Italians: the ennoblement of women and the vernacular, both of which intertwine. Petrarch’s right, and Gerson realized this too without letting the side down: we may be as good as they are, but we aren’t as good at flaunting it. And I’m not certain it’s really a question of Latinity alone, as Petrarch said so nastily—nullus doctus in Gallia—what nerve! He who gleaned so much from his time in the Vaucluse! That self-crowned poet laureate may have been throwing us a red herring while weakening our chances to capture the papacy. Yes, we too must develop our Latin and vernacular national literatures—the first for us perfecti and the second for that vital yet less-literate rabble—to create a new national literature. After all, we certainly used to rule the roost, with Chrétien [de Troyes], et al., for courtly romance and with Lorris and Meun for allegory, didn’t we? So much so that Brunetto Latini found it more prestigious to write his Trésor in French instead of his native tongue, or Latin!

Then that “noble Florentine” came along and started ruining everything: merged lyric feeling and love of woman with divine allegory and universal history, in Italian as exquisite as Latin, yet comprehensible. And so subtle is he that he calls it a “comedy!” I couldn’t resist reading through it when Mézières showed me a copy awhile back and I am awed, even with my imperfect Italian. That’s how I was able to endow “Christine” with those allusions, especially to the Inferno. After Dante, as you know, came Boccaccio and Petrarch, plus super bureaucratic types like Salutati with their elegant handwriting and Ciceronian flair. I’ve tried explaining all this to Clamanges but he won’t listen. I can barely mention Petrarch’s name without him blowing up. Clamanges is a marvelous Latin stylist and textual scholar, our country’s best, but I don’t dare tell him I think Petrarch is as good and sometimes better. Clamanges owes his excellence to Petrarch’s presence, both as model and challenge, no matter what he says. He’s always competing with him and his disciples without admitting it; even starting to imitate Salutati’s handwriting, again not admitting it; claiming he’s reforming
French calligraphy. Why, his study was a mess with bits of paper and broken quills the other day when I visited him. And because he sees Latin as the only gauge of cultural worth, he cares nothing for trying to achieve in French what his rival has in his Italian *Rime*, in the name of Laura. All questions of vernacular vs. Latin aside, as for Clamanges revering women, forget it: philology yes, "philogyny," no!

But I have become carried away, neologisms and all; I hope not to have bored you with current events and shall now endeavor to answer your parting questions.

I do hope Orléans will have another *fête*; however, his raffishness and sheer lack of tact with Burgundy worries me: blood is thinner than respect as far as the Fearless one is concerned. What should sober *hommes d'esprit* like ourselves about this power struggle is that the Fearless is also as humorless as he is ruthless: fancy having to execute beautiful works of literature and illumination as inspired by such a patron! He did not inherit the fine tastes of papa Philip [the Bold].

As for Christine the "scriveness": she still labors away in the notarial offices, lucky to have a wage-earning position as a young widow, through her father's contacts. I doubt she knows anything of how famous she is! Her mother doesn't help: sometimes she flounces down to the atelier to ask for money to go shopping (complaining that French bread remains inferior to her memories of that back home in Italy), while chiding Christine for always wearing that same blue dress and wimple.

Montreuil.


My Dear Montreuil,

Gontier has just told me of your latest plans. Of course, what he hasn't told you outright, because he's still smarting from its effects, is how much he admires your ability to complain like a woman. This knack you displayed not only via this "Christine" character but more directly the time you imitated Marguerite [Gontier's wife] in a letter to him, lamenting his vile treatment of her. My, but it was really convincing! Gontier was furious at first; I've since heard through the grapevine that Marguerite has confided her amusement to friends, although she swears she knew nothing of your witty little revenge against my brother. His
philandering really *had* gotten out of hand, especially for a royal official. Colleagues have long been referring to him as Gontier *Cul* behind his back...

Col.

Dear Col,

No, 'tis true: Marguerite is innocent and frankly too good a woman for your brother, whatever his professional qualities. I'd had enough of Gontier’s behavior. These have been interesting exercises for me, since, for professional reasons, my entire notion of *beau stil* and voice had been shaped by Latin, even when composing in French. It’s been quite fascinating to try and cultivate a personal style in French—as odd as that may seem, since it is our native tongue!—and to deal with informal personal matters, instead of lofty polemics, legality and diplomacy. I was even afraid I’d slip, when re-creating Marguerite Col or Christine, and sound too Latinate, thus giving myself away as a cleric. For no woman could know Latin. Our Christine does to some extent, quite surprisingly, but that’s because of her indulgent father and her own experience with legal documents. But she’s an aberration in that sense. We couldn’t have a second-class citizen—a mere woman, no matter how learned—declaiming in the First Rhetoric, now could we?

Montreuil.

[Fragment of COL to MONTREUIL]:

Well, it looks as though you’re going to be too busy with political affairs and diplomacy. But there must be plenty of bright young souls coming out of [the College of] Navarre these days,$^{12}$ maybe some of them would like to join us in continuing the game. I doubt I’ll bother trying those stolid grinds over at the Sorbonne.

[Fragment of MONTREUIL to COL]:

Yes, but be careful. Some of those nice young men may convert themselves to the feminine cause, having taken our mocking pastiches too seriously.

Let posterity judge her as a bluestocking, if a learned and well-meaning one. The world won’t change, whether they speak Latin or French; it will still belong to learned and clever men. We’ve fabricated our share of defenses of women to keep those do-gooders of both genders off guard. Or maybe we could try inventing a new woman epistolary author. I noticed our Meun translated those letters by Abelard and the supposed Héloïse.$^{13}$ And that would annoy the Chancellor no end, what fun!$^{14}$

2 Gerson’s epistle to Pierre Col against the *Roman de la Rose*, Hicks ed. p. 162.

3 Hicks ed., 42–45; Montreuil’s apology, perhaps done with a wink, comes at the end of his epistle to the unknown poet.


5 Ezio Ornato discusses Clamanges’ third epistle, its authenticity, and the author’s disrespectful, excessive familiarity with the pope in *Jean Muret et ses amis Nicolas de Clamanges et Jean de Montreuil* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 17–25. Clamanges defended his use of *tu* by declaring it a humanistic convention based on its usage by classical Roman authors; in a similar way and with equal lack of success, Col would defend his *tutoiement* of Christine.

6 “... je devisay Ie premier motif et le derrenier terme de nostre debat.” Hicks ed. 148; analysis, xxiv.

7 On Christine having possibly been influenced by salaciously-illuminated *Roman de la Rose* manuscripts, see Meredith T. McMunn, “Was Christine Poisoned by an Illustrated *Rose*?” *Profane Arts / Les Arts Profanes*, 7:2 (Autumn 1998), 135–51.


9 This was Gerson’s guiding tenet when defending France against Italian denigration in his *Traité contre Juan de Monzon*. See Gilbert Ouy, “La Plus ancienne oeuvre retrouvée de Jean Gerson: Le brouillon inachevé d’un traité contre Juan de Monzon (1389–1390),” *Romania* 83 (1962), 433–92.


13 The authenticity of Héloïse’s letters, i.e., whether she penned them or Abelard did, is the subject of longstanding debate. Perhaps the latest succinct and lucid overview is that by Barbara Newman in her review of *The Lost Love Letters of Héloise and Abelard*, by Constant J. Mews, in the online *The Medieval Review*, 25 Jan. 2000 (TMR 00.01.06). See also Newman’s “Authority, Authenticity and the Repression of Héloïse,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 22:2 (Spring 1992), 121–57.

14 Composed after he became chancellor of the University of Paris, Gerson’s treatise against the *Roman de la Rose* deplored the immorality of Héloïse and Abelard, Hicks ed. 77.