

LEMARCHAND, Marie-José. ed & trans 2000. *Cristina de Pizán: La ciudad de las damas*. Madrid, Siruela. 299 pp.

Christine de Pizan's works have been read for decades in France, and certainly they have also received wide acknowledgment and attention from diverse critical stances in the Anglo-American world. However, their reception in Spain has not followed the same course, which makes Spanish editions of these works quite necessary and always welcome. The one we refer to here is the second edition of a pioneer translation into Spanish of *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405), a book that has profoundly determined Christine's portrait for posterity. As numerous as the contours of her literary and experiential activity may have been, the fact is that our current perception of her is marked by her figuring among the allegorical, mythological and historical women that inhabited her *cité des dames*. That is, it is mainly from her position as a woman that wrote about women that we first come to know, understand and judge her. Taking this into account, the present translation seems to reflect the growing awareness and demand for female literature among Spanish readers, within a broader movement of search for the origins and first utterances of modern concerns. Such is the case of feminism, the roots of which have been sought in ancient and medieval seeds.

Although the label "feminist" does not seem to fit in the medieval world, it certainly seems adequate to some of Christine's claims, spontaneous or short-sighted as they may seem from 20th-century standards. We should wonder, therefore, about the particular circumstances that allowed Christine to articulate such an individual response, one that prefigures the tenets of some modern positions. On the other hand, warnings against the phantom of anachronism have led scholars to dive into the reception of her works in the 15th century, thus trying to set Christine in her own milieu (Solterer 2002). But when placing her in the historical context of late medieval France, we discover an even more amazing character: the cultivated young widow and mother who, out of necessity, decides to make a living as a writer. Christine's remarkable decision confirms the rise of new roles for courtly

literature and highlights her challenging and assertive convictions as an early professional author. These convictions—together with her pecuniary needs—will turn her into the most prolific woman writer of the Middle Ages and one that cultivated the most diverse genres (narrative and lyrical poetry, hortatory epistles, allegory, dream visions, history, biography and autobiography) and who still had the time and energy to oversee the complete process of production of her manuscripts. However, if reality surpasses fiction in that the achievements of the real woman are as outstanding as her literary production, it is precisely from the insight provided by historical perspective and textual confrontation that some medievalists disavow such a mother for the feminist literary tradition (Delany 1987). If during her lifetime Christine was a major source of polemic and a great lover of *querelles*, just like then she is still able to stir current readers to discussion (Quilligan 1991).

Approaching *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* in this special edition may shed light about many of these debated issues and help us to understand her better. It is particularly so since the editor provides an accurate and thorough introduction to Christine's life and working conditions. Lemarchand emphasizes aspects such as the cultural transformation undertaken by Charles V, who, by launching a program of translation—intensely supported by Nicole Oresme—enhanced the growing consciousness of a national language. Christine did participate in this movement by writing all of her works neither in her native Italian nor in Latin, but in French, as well as by including in her own prose production passages from French translations of works by Aristotle, John of Salisbury or Valerius Maximus, among others (Fenster 1998). This translation of *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* reflects wonderfully the specific use Christine made of the Latin syntax and vocabulary within the French frame, whereby she created a hybrid style that reconciled the accomplishments of Latin and the aspirations of French as a cultural language. Thus, by turning to prose and following this specific style, she endowed French with a strength that so far had exclusively belonged to Latin. In *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* Christine not only embodies the royal attempt to enact the ultimate *translatio imperii* model by bringing the humanistic aims born in Italy into French, but she consciously addresses the issue of linguistic translation as one deeply

intertwined with the problem of the misunderstanding between the sexes. *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* does, in fact, enact the antagonism between the interpretation of women produced by the learned misogynous tradition over the centuries and the medieval set of texts in favor of them. But Christine places the debate outside the academic scheme of the *disputatio* by presenting it in an allegorical frame that allows her to bring the debate to the sphere of civic and public welfare. The use of French is politically justified then, just as the defense of women is. Even Christine's selection and translation of many of Boccaccio's *exempla* from his *De Claris Mulieribus* suggest her critical commentary about his preference for Latin and his vision of women as excellent only when male identified (Phillippy 1997). Instead, Christine celebrates difference between men and women and even defends female superiority, characterizing women not only as capable of any activity so far attributed to men but as naturally gentle, sweet, kind and loyal, and therefore more reliable and appropriate to build and dwell in this allegorical city. Lemarchand remarks the importance that Christine, a reader of Dante's works, gives to the writing process, through which the eschatological pertinence of the idea of the city confounds itself with the transformation Christine demands in the consideration for the female figure.

As for the quality of this translation, Lemarchand, a historian and sociologist, is mainly an experienced philologist quite familiarized with the translation of medieval French texts into Spanish. Her profound acquaintance with these contents has turned her into one of the most regular contributors to the series *Siruela* devotes to medieval literature. Thus it is to her that Spanish readers owe not only the 1995 first edition of this work, but translations of some of the foundational pieces of French medieval literature, such as *El viaje de San Brandán*, *El paraíso de la reina Sibila*, *El juego del ajedrez*, *La doncella manca* or *El caballero del león*. Her contribution to the transmission of Christine's work in Spanish cannot be denied, a demanding project which required her best abilities to deal both with Christine's syntactic exuberance and with some natural unaffected expressions in her work. Her delicacy in blending the late-medieval flavor in some terms without spicing them too much through the use of archaisms is remarkable, the best example being the very name she finds for Lady Droiture, *Derechura*.

But this edition is also highly commendable for its inclusion of illustrations that enlighten us about the dynamics of patronage and reception of late medieval texts. The translation is interspersed with some visual material corresponding to the engravings of the 1494 Zaragoza edition of Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*, printed by Paulus Hurus. The rest of the pictures gathered and placed at the beginning have been extracted from different manuscripts of Christine's works. Lemarchand has used as her main source Marureen Cheny Curnow's 1975 critical edition, and has also considered MS 608/1178 & 1179 (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris) as well as MS Harley 4431 (British Library, London), since the latter is an autograph one and furthermore it was revised by Christine in 1410. Some of the illuminations of Lemarchand's edition come from these manuscripts; their beauty can only be equaled by the quality of the information they convey. Although Christine refers in *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* to one Anastasia, a coetaneous exceptional illuminator who had made some of the drawings in her copies, there are no official records of this woman, and thus the author of some of these early illuminations is referred to simply as *The Cité des Dames Master*, whose works show the pervasiveness of Italian models in early 15th-century Paris (Cannon Willard 1984).

The Harley manuscript, comprising both courtly and didactic works by Christine, was presented by her to the queen of France, Isabeau of Bavaria. It is of special significance to medievalists, not only because it proves this author's control over works she had previously dedicated to other patrons (McGrady 1998), but because it suggests the intermittent but regular relationship Christine de Pizan had with the English aristocracy, as well as the place she would have in future decades within the English literary scene. According to Cynthia Brown (1998), her reputation in England was quite high during her lifetime and the 15th century, as her presentation of copies of her works to Richard II and Henry IV, or the Duke of Bedford's acquisition of some of her manuscripts well attest. Henry VII's commissioning of the translation of the *Livre des Fais d'Armes et de Chevalerie* to William Caxton, who had earlier edited her *Morale Proverbes*, also hint at this recognition. In both editions (1478 and 1489) Christine's authorship was highly praised and acknowledged, thus passing from aristocratic to middle-class readers. However, despite the high number of manuscripts of her work

present in British collections, by the second decade of the 16th century, her authorship was altogether ignored in Henry Pepwell's first English edition of *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, *Cyte of Ladyes*, translated by Brian Anslay and printed in 1521 (Summit 2000). Thus, whereas in 1405 Christine's ground-breaking work had been the first by a woman about the history of women and had possibly started the French *querelle des femmes* that would last for a long time, a century later her own name had started to fall into oblivion and her works appeared under other authors' headings (as happened with Richard Pynson's 1526 re-edition of the *Moral Proverbes*, inserted within an anthology of Chaucer's works). Although silence and misattribution were her lot for centuries, we hope editions and translations like this (including generous notes, bibliography and analytical and general indexes), throughout the world will make Christine de Pizan and her *Livre de la Cité des Dames* impossible to forget.

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