

Equal in the Eyes of God:
Religious Feminism in the Writings of Christine de Pisan

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HSTAM 340
Winter 2002
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Any movement which attempts to cause lasting change in a major aspect of society must be a slow, gradual one if it hopes to succeed. It must also adapt along with the society that it is adapting. Feminism is no exception. Its roots go back to the first woman to wonder about the circumstances and role of her gender in society. The first written examples of feminism are in the writings of Christine de Pisan, a fifteenth-century French author and poet, known as "France's first woman of letters"¹. While not all of her positions agree with feminist philosophy, the differences arise due to the evolution of feminism rather than a conflict in her beliefs. Christine de Pisan was a religious feminist, which meant that she believed in the equality of the sexes in the eyes of God. Her writings inspired the ideas eventually evolved into the feminist movement of modern times.

In order to truly show Christine de Pisan as a feminist, a definition of *feminism* must be constructed. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "advocacy of the rights of women (based on the theory of equality of the sexes)"², and Merriam-Webster defines it as "organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests"³. For the purposes of this essay, I will define feminism as women promoting equality of the sexes by writing or otherwise acting on behalf of women as a whole.

While equality between the sexes wasn't even a consideration in medieval Europe, it had been steadily increasing in the centuries leading up to the dawn of the fifteenth century CE. Misogyny was "an all too pervasive characteristic of the writing popular in"⁴ the days of Christine de Pisan; indeed, in the beginning of *The Book of the City of Ladies*,

¹ Willard, *Life and Works*, p. 15.

² "feminism," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

³ "feminism." *Merriam-Webster OnLine*.

⁴ Willard, *Writings*, p. 135.

Christine de Pisan wonders "how it happened 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 devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behavior."⁵ She cites several examples, including Mathéolus⁶, Ovid⁷, Cecco d'Ascoli⁸, Cicero⁹, and Cato Uticensis¹⁰, just to name a few. Some of these cited writings include Cicero's, that "a man should never serve any woman . . . for no man should ever serve anyone lower than him"¹¹, and Cecco d'Ascoli, "who wrote . . . such astounding abominations that a reasonable person ought not to repeat them."¹² The result, according to Christine, was that she "still argued vehemently against women, saying that it would be impossible that so many famous men . . . could have spoken falsely on so many occasions that I could hardly find a book on morals where . . . I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was."¹³ Christine saw the parallel between omnipresent misogyny in popular writings and the lack of a defense from the women of her time. "Those of you who have fine daughters and wish to instruct them in decent living, . . . go out and and get *The Romance of the Rose* to learn to distinguish right from wrong—indeed!—rather wrong from right!"¹⁴

However, women were not merely slighted in writing—the misogyny of the period was, of course, pervasive. At the time, it was "a proven fact that women have

⁵ Christine de Pisan, pp. 3-4. (Anything simply listed as Christine de Pisan refers to The Book of the City of Ladies.)

⁶ Christine de Pisan, p. 3.

⁷ Christine de Pisan, p. 21.

⁸ Christine de Pisan, p. 22.

⁹ Christine de Pisan, p. 24.

¹⁰ Christine de Pisan, p. 25.

¹¹ Christine de Pisan, p. 24.

¹² Christine de Pisan, p. 22.

¹³ Christine de Pisan, p. 4.

¹⁴ "Lesser Treatise on the Romance of the Rose, June-July 1401", from Writings, p. 151.

weak bodies, tender and feeble in deeds of strength, and are cowards by nature."¹⁵

Women were also, for the most part, uneducated, "because men maintain that the mind of women can learn only a little."¹⁶ And finally, it was said, "women by nature have a servile heart"¹⁷; these three together add up to a condemnation against women in body, mind, and soul. In "The Letter of the God of Love", she writes that "now in France, the place where in the past women were honored so, those men who're false dishonor them, more in other lands, especially . . . the noblemen, who used to champion them."¹⁸

Historians support what Christine wrote about her period; one says that she is "equally important as a vivid witness of the times in which she lived".¹⁹

Against this backdrop of misogyny and inequality, Christine de Pisan's life stands out as "altogether phenomenal".²⁰ Her father was chosen to be a court astrologer for Charles V, and she moved with him, who, as Christine herself wrote, "took great pleasure from seeing [her] inclination to learning."²¹ This education, in fact, came "against her mother's wishes".²² Her marriage was an uncommonly happy and mutually supportive one; her husband even encouraged her further education, and that he "liked everything she did and understood and trusted her absolutely".²³ After the death of her husband, she took up writing to support her children. As they grew more independent, she found the freedom to expand and increase her writing.²⁴ "More important than Christine the moralist, and just as important as Christine the patriot, was Christine the upholder of the

¹⁵ Christine de Pisan, p. 36.

¹⁶ Christine de Pisan, p. 63.

¹⁷ Christine de Pisan, p. 26.

¹⁸ "Letter to the God of Love" from *Writings*, p. 145 (lines 28-32).

¹⁹ Willard, *Writings*, p. ix.

²⁰ Willard, *Writings*, p. ix.

²¹ Christine de Pisan, p. 154.

²² Stacey, 22 Feb 2002.

²³ McLeod, p. 25.

²⁴ McLeod, p. 43.

cause of women, both those who are weak and have none to fight for them, and those who are strong but . . . were not sufficiently appreciated, and who are still treated as inferior human beings because they are women."²⁵

At this point in her life, Christine wrote *Cupid's Letter*. This was to become the first volley of what was to become the *Querelle de la Rose*²⁶, the "first recorded literary quarrel in France."²⁷ Indeed, it "has even been supposed that she instigated it . . . and that in this capacity she acted as the forerunner of all subsequent movements in behalf of women's rights."²⁸ In response to a list of attacks written against women throughout time, Christine writes, "Between my lady Nature and myself, we'll not accept, as long as life endures, that women not be cherished well and loved, in spite of all who'd censure them."²⁹ She also advises men to "strive for real esteem, to be sincere, discreet, speak truthfully, be giving, courtly, flee from gossipers . . . and let all those deserving of acclaim take weapons up. Whoever holds to that, let him know surely [Cupid] won't fail to grant a beautiful, sweet lady-love to him."³⁰ As one historian explains, "since their lot could obviously be improved by a change in men's attitudes and behavior towards them, one of Christine's aims was to educate these men. She also advocated a more constructive attitude on the part of women towards their own lives."³¹ The *Querelle de la Rose*

²⁵ McLeod, p. 44.

²⁶ According to Willard, *Writings*, p. 139, the *Querelle de la Rose* was actually started by an enthusiastic treatise by Jean de Montreuil, a royal secretary and the Provost of Lille, in the spring of 1401. However, *Cupid's Letter* was a definite precursor, and can still be considered the instigator of the later debate.

²⁷ Willard, *Life and Works*, p. 73.

²⁸ Willard, *Life and Works*, p. 73.

²⁹ Willard, *Writings*, p. 147 (lines 297-300).

³⁰ Willard, *Writings*, p. 146 (lines 76-78, 81-84).

³¹ Willard, *Writings*, pp. 137-138.

"demonstrated Christine's undaunted spirit and won her new fame as a writer and a champion of the female sex."³²

Her writings were, of course, not met with universal accord. For example, a modern scholar writes that "Christine avoids countering the absurd generalizations of the clerical misogyny she sets out to refute with unsupportable counter-exaggerations of her own. Thus [*Cupid's Letter*] is not so much a 'feminist' polemic as an essay in anti-antifeminism, which is not the same thing."³³ He goes on to write that her "objections to [*the Romance of the Rose*] were two: it is antifeminist, and it is filthy. . . . Taken at face value, neither of Christine's principal arguments seems very telling, or even very intelligent"³⁴, even going so far as to say that part of her argument "borders on the ludicrous"³⁵ and that her "allegorical veil is spun of fine transparent silk; it richly adorns, but barely conceals."³⁶

Even if these allegations were true, Christine's later works gain in eloquence, literary merit, and influence, as well as in the strength of her feminist ideas. In 1405, Christine wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which her feminist argument is truly explained and clarified. Through Reason, she quickly refutes the idea that women have weaker bodies, for Adam was formed from mud while "God formed the body of woman from one of his ribs, signifying that she should stand at his side as a companion and never lie at his feet like a slave".³⁷ As to the religious argument that men are superior because

³² Bornstein, p. 18.

³³ Fleming, p. 21.

³⁴ Fleming, p. 28.

³⁵ Fleming, p. 28.

³⁶ Fleming, p. 35.

³⁷ Christine de Pisan, p. 23.

"God created man in his own image",³⁸ Christine explains that some men think "that this refers to the material body. This was not the case, for God had not yet taken a material body. The soul is meant, the intellectual spirit which lasts eternally . . . God created the soul and placed wholly similar souls, equally good and noble in the feminine and in the masculine bodies."³⁹ And, even if "women have more delicate bodies than men, . . . they have minds that are freer and sharper whenever they apply themselves."⁴⁰ In this manner, she argues against the very basis of the misogyny explained previously, showing women to be at least equal, if not greater, in body, mind, and soul.

In perhaps her most bold and far-reaching statement, Christine, through Reason, explains why women know less than men in the period: Women know less than men because "they are not involved in many different things, but stay at home, . . . and there is nothing which so instructs a reasonable creature as the exercise and experience of many different things. . . . Look at men who farm the flatlands or who live in the mountains. You will find that in many countries they seem completely savage because they are so simpleminded. All the same, there is no doubt that Nature provided them with the qualities of body and mind found in the wisest and most learned men. All of this stems from a failure to learn".⁴¹ The statement made is that humanity surpasses both class and gender—a peasant is as capable as a noble man or woman, and the only differences are the opportunities afforded to them by their class and gender. This argument alone could be called the foundation of feminism: one historian writes that "on more education for

³⁸ New International Version, Genesis 1:27. Oddly enough, this verse is often taken out of context—the full verse is, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The full verse seems to make the religious argument moot on its face anyway.

³⁹ Christine de Pisan, p. 23.

⁴⁰ Christine de Pisan, p. 63.

⁴¹ Christine de Pisan, pp. 63-64.

women, Christine de Pisan is firm, and this will be the most consistent demand of proto-feminist and feminist writing in all subsequent centuries, whatever views are held on women's nature."⁴²

One of the main parts of *City of Ladies* that some feminists have taken issue with is, in her address to ladies at the end, when she commands, "And you ladies who are married, do not scorn being subject to your husbands, for sometimes it is not the best thing for a creature to be independent. . . . Those women who have husbands who are cruel, mean, and savage should strive to endure them while trying to overcome their vices and lead them back, if they can, to a reasonable and seemly life."⁴³ This is not contrary to her otherwise feminist viewpoint; it is simply that the evolution of feminism has allowed it to escape the religious grasp that the entire society was held in during the fifteenth century CE. All along, the only force Christine has answered to has been the Bible itself, rather than interpretations of it that she corrects. In this section, she is parroting the Bible: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord."⁴⁴ However, she has an expectation that the rest of the section will be heeded as well: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . . . He who loves his wife loves himself."⁴⁵ Christine's own marriage was a direct reflection of this, and she was able to see the truth in it more than most of her period.

Moreover, Christine's advice was also "practical and concerned with explaining to wives where their best self-interest lay. A wife who openly showed her dislike of her husband diminished him in the eyes of the world and thus undermined her own

⁴² Davis, p. xx.

⁴³ Christine de Pisan, p. 255.

⁴⁴ New International Version, Ephesians 5:22.

⁴⁵ New International Version, Ephesians 5:25, 28.

position."⁴⁶ In this light, Christine was arguing both for the moral sanctity she had been known for showing since the *Querelle de la Rose*, and also was arguing for the advancement of women even in ways that might not have been initially obvious.

One of the ironies of Christine de Pisan's feminist approach was that, for as accepted as she was in her time, her writings were forgotten for centuries after her death, only to be rediscovered in the last century or so. One historian writes that "had Christine de Pisan been a man and therefore a member of the clerkly intelligentsia, it is likely that he' would have long been considered the single most important literary figure of the early fifteenth century. Although Christine enjoyed considerable renown during her lifetime and throughout most of the Renaissance, for the next three centuries she was relegated to that oblivion so common for women writers."⁴⁷ In order for Christine to have the influence in her time that she truly desired, she would have needed to have been a man, which would have defeated the purpose of her writing entirely.

Was the religious feminism of Christine de Pisan a true precursor to today's feminist movement? As a woman writing about women's issues, and pushing for equality through the education of both men and women, this definitely fits the previously given definition of feminism. In fact, even her attitudes that would seem antifeminist in a modern setting can be viewed as either fitting with her religion (and thereby providing a different avenue for the advancement of women) or as providing practical advice to advance the status of women in another area. In short, Christine started the movement toward equality of the sexes and gave it its initial momentum through her own awareness

⁴⁶ Bell, pp. 179-180.

⁴⁷ Benkov, p. 33.

of her identity: "Indeed, she was the first French literary figure who explicitly incorporated her identity as a woman into her identity as an author."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Brownlee, p. 234.

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