

CHRISTINE DE PISAN

Christine de Pisan. Christine de Pisan (1363-1430) was a remarkably self-willed and creative lyric poet, eminent to us now for the vigor with which she stood up for women's rights, in an era when women were being viewed as breeders and beauties, and on the street and in literature widely viewed as harlots. Christine was none of those things, and deeply resented this harsh male dominated attitude.

Life and work of Christine de Pisan. Christine de Pisan was married at fifteen to a French nobleman, who died ten years later, leaving her a widow with three children dependent on her. Unlike most women in her situation, at the time, she managed to create a role for herself as a professional writer, the first such in the West. The capacity for this self-creation lay in her early exposures to literature and culture. Born in Venice, her father a Councillor to the City of Venice, she remained in the shadows, learning, marrying, mothering, but from early childhood on conversant with major libraries and book collections, in that cultural crossroads environment. Until the mid 1390's she wrote ballads, heavily tinged with chivalry and chivalric lore, a chief stock of her reading. After her husband's death she began to show her works, which were of great autobiographical as well as chivalric interest, and she gained widespread attention among the noble courts of France. It was in that fashion, as her work was heard and read, that she won appointments as court writer for several dukes and finally for the King of France, Charles VI. In this professional life she supported herself and her children, and ultimately completed some forty one books in a thirty year period of writing.

Themes in the work of Christine de Pisan. The major collections of Christine de Pisan's work are her *Book of the Three Virtues*, a history of her nation—which was barely conscious of its nationhood at this time—from the Trojan War to the founding of France. Her second, and most widely read and influential, book was *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405). In that book she imagines a symbolic city in which women are greatly admired and emulated—a fantasy that lies deep in Christine's drive. The greatest of the female virtues—Reason; Justice; Rectitude—are celebrated and virtually divinized in this text, which especially needs understanding against its background.

The background of Christine de Pisan's defence of women. There has been much discussion of Christine de Pisan's so called feminism. The distinguished Existentialist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir, believed Christine de Pisan was an early feminist, interested in gender issues; others followed that conception, making her something of a hero to some in the 'women's movement' of the last century. However we see Christine's strong position, we know it was aired conspicuously, in her time, by her public critical attacks on the poet Jean de Meung, and his *Roman de la Rose*. In that chivalric epic, Jean de Meung celebrates the wonder of women, while at the same time denigrating them. It would be fair to say that, in the epic, Jean de Meung slanders and vilifies women, agents of seduction, untrue spirits, vulgar sluts. The language he adopts is from the streets, and expressed current attitudes bitterly familiar to Christine de Pisan.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Book of the City of Ladies, trans. Brown-Grant, 1999.

Secondary source reading,

Willard, Charity, *Christine de Pisan: Her Life and Works*, 1984.

Further reading

Altmann and McGrady, eds., *Christine de Pisan: A Casebook*, 2003.

Original language reading

Kosta-Thefaine, Jean-Francois, *La Pretresse et la guerrière*, 2008.

Suggested paper topics

Was Christine de Pisan a feminist, as we might understand the expression today, or was she simply a talented woman of her time playing at the chivalric rules of male female give and take? Is it easy to misinterpret gender attitudes at a distance of several centuries from ourselves? Why?

Review the attitude toward woman in fourteenth century France. What kinds of freedom did women have? Study the problems Christine de Pisan had, in acquiring the inheritance due her on her husband's death. Do you think those problems were at the root of her fierce defense of women?

Excerpt

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ballad-v/tp>

Since, O my Love, I may behold no more
Thy sovereign beauty that was all my cheer,
My heart is given up to sorrows sore :
For though the wealth of all the world were here,

There is no ease but in beholding thee
Who art afar ! Whence I of tears am fain
Mourning the happy days that used to be :
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Doubt not of this, true love whom I adore,
Thine image in my soul is ever clear :
I think but on the blessedness of yore
And on thy beauty, simple-sweet and dear.
So fiercely smiteth love, I may not flee
Nor may my soul the dread assault sustain :
Death could not bring a sorrier weird to see,
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Alas ! one only mercy I implore.
When I am dead (as I to death am near)
Pray for me, and thy praying shall restore
My wounded spirit : shed one tender tear.
Great were my comfort if my piteous plea
Might touch thy heart, if sorrow might constrain
Thy lips to sigh, such need of sighs have we.
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.

Sweet flower, to whom I do abandon it,
My heart is broken down with bitter pain
For one whom Fortune would not have me see :
Yet unto none but thee may I complain.