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An Allegory of Female Resistance: Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*

A principal feature in Christine de Pizan's dispute with the medieval representation of women, in particular in the allegory *The Romance of the Rose*, is utility. Christine cannot accept de Meun's naturalistic discourse of love because she is concerned with the connection between defamatory language and its effect on its female audiences. This has been called a prudish and moralistic position, but its purpose is to make explicit the relation between verbal figuration and social domination (Willard and Solterer). In my paper I will not concentrate so much on her counter arguments as on her strategy to dismantle the symbolic power of the medieval representation of women and femininity.

As Kristeva has shown, *The Romance of the Rose* incorporates a radical change from courtly love and its idealisation of the Lady to her debasement. I will argue that Christine de Pizan responds to this change by a kind of de-idealisation, i.e. she gives place for what idealisation represses, the experience of real women. Her allegory can, as Quilligan points out, be regarded as a construction of a place for female experience, probably for the first time in literary history. The architectural metaphor of the city of ladies is then not only told in order to present arguments against a misogynous corpus of texts, but also to construct an imaginary place, and a support for a feminine subject position. Women as passive readers are here transformed into active subjects producing, as Le Dœff puts it, "an imaginary, the city populated with respectable women which are as much a psychological support for everyone, as a poetics which at the same time is an ethics and a mode of resistance."

This dialogical, imaginary place of female experience is however at the same time strongly violent. The foundation stones of the city are all warrior queens, Semiramis, the Amazons, and other queens known above all for their capacities on the battlefield. It is important to ask why this violent grounding of the city is needed. According to Quilligan this is a rhetorical tactic to open a discursive space for female subjectivity. In my paper I take this argument a step further, and suggest that, what Christine does is not only a rewriting of a literary tradition in order to give voice and place to female experience. She also deconstructs the idealisation of the woman, which is intrinsic to misogynous representations.

References

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