CHAPTER THREE

One day as I was sitting alone in my study surrounded by books on all sorts of subjects, devoting myself to literary studies, my usual habit, my mind dwelt at length on the weighty opinions of various authors whom I had studied for a long time. (Le Livre de la Cité des Dames)¹

In the following chapter I will examine the claims made for Christine by recent criticism. As I discussed in Chapter One, the rediscovery of Christine's work by feminist literary historians has led to a renewal of studies of this author and her writing, and the rehabilitation of Christine from relative obscurity to a recognised figure of women's literary past and a dedicated campaigner for her sex. Many of these constructions of Christine have centred on her participation in the Querelle de la Rose and her two major prose works concerning women, La Cité des Dames and Les Trois Vertus. They rely on a reading of Christine as a politically progressive thinker on such issues as women's moral equality, ability to learn and the need for a more complete education for women. In order to address these and other questions about Christine I have divided the chapter into two sections. In Section One I will examine the various claims
regarding Christine's political views by looking carefully at what Christine herself has to say about women's capabilities, social roles and education in her most overtly didactic work on women, *La Cité des Dames*. The little we know from letters and notes of the response of Christine's contemporaries to her ideas will also be examined. To determine whether the opinions she holds are in fact innovative or at all radical in their outlook on women, I will place them in the context of developing humanist thought, both in its French environs and from its Italian origins. Being of Italian birth herself, Christine had linguistic access to humanist writing from its beginnings. She had the added advantage of a substantial education, provided by her father, Tommaso di Benvenuto da Pissano, who became the royal astrologer at the court of Charles V shortly after Christine's birth. Despite her mother's opposition and the conventions of the day, Tommaso is remembered by Christine as encouraging her to study.²

It will also be necessary to question just how genuinely advanced humanist thought regarding women was, particularly in relation to the debate on women's education. Medieval
scholarship can no longer afford to ignore the work of Joan Kelly who, in her influential essay, 'Did Women have a Renaissance?', exposed the falsity of the claim that the 'Renaissance' was a period of enlightenment and progress as far as women were concerned. We must question whether the early forms of humanism that flourished in Christine's time were liberating for women, as has been claimed, or whether they were as constraining and deprecating of women as their more institutionalised and politically powerful counterparts of the so-called 'high Renaissance' have been shown to be.3

My purpose is not to question whether Christine is worthy of the critical attention she has received over the last two decades from feminist scholars working on the recovery of women's literary past. Such a project has been invaluable in providing contemporary women with a sense of our own literary history and making us aware of its duration and continuity. As the first known woman to support herself with a pen, Christine is an essential figure of our literary past and the magnitude of her achievements deserves this latest recognition. But, in order to recognise just where Christine's real radicalism lies it is
first necessary to discard some of the less sustainable images of her that recent criticism has created. I believe that Christine's challenges to the dominant gender constructions of her day are to be found, not in her political activism, but in her manipulation of the exclusively male forms of textuality available in her time. Christine not only manages to gain access to the written word and establish herself as a court poet, patronised by leading members of the aristocracy at the royal court, but she does so, to appropriate one of Virginia Woolf's favourite expressions, 'as a woman'. The voice within both her poetry and her prose is distinctly female. Not only do internal references in her work point to the female gender of their author, but I hope to show that in her later works on women the structure, content and authorial intention of her writing betray a strong female perspective. *La Cité des Dames* is perhaps the best example of her daring.

In *La Cité des Dames* Christine intervenes and participates within a genre considered to be exclusively male; the genre of history. Within this male literary domain Christine composes a history specifically for and about women, written, uniquely, by
a woman. Moreover, to achieve this aim Christine skilfully manipulates the masculine authority of her source, Boccaccio, to validate her own literary ambitions in a society still suspicious and repressive of women's speech. In doing so she challenges and overcomes some of the enormous obstacles inhibiting women's participation in the dominant male literary tradition. Such are the claims I wish to make for Christine in the second section of this chapter.

To establish my argument I will analyse the ways in which Christine uses Boccaccio's name to authorise her own visionary city. I will also show how her textual deviations from his stories reflect her vastly different textual ambitions and her own particular desire to recreate a more positive image of history's studious women as an example to her contemporaries of both sexes.

The separation of Christine's political conservatism from her textual achievements imposes an artificial constraint on my work, but must be maintained in order to distinguish clearly the reasons why most recent arguments for Christine's status as a
campaigner for women's rights and interests must fail. Despite this deflation of Christine's image as a 'feminist', there is still a great deal that can be said about Christine's achievements that is, in some ways, even more expressly radical than the portrait so far offered by recent readings of her work. There is a good basis for recognising Christine as a daring and innovative woman in her specifically gendered use of the male dominated textuality of her time. Her work inspired other women to become involved in such debates as the *Querelle des Femmes* and provided them with a literary model on which to found their own more politically oriented calls for women's access to the written word, education and civil rights.\(^5\) Christine's later writing on women reveals her as, perhaps, the first literary foremother to confront and effectively participate within the definitively male literary tradition of her period and to promote a distinctly gendered perspective in her writing.
SECTION ONE

Because Christine is the first recognised professional woman writer, many feminist scholars involved in the recuperation of women's literary history place a great deal of importance on the representation of Christine as a 'proto-feminist'. The ambiguity of Christine's position regarding women has, consequently, been a source of great controversy amongst her modern critics. Many of the disagreements have centred on her attitude towards the contemporary politics of her day, her relationship to the French court, the influence of early renaissance humanism on her work, and most commonly, her position on the role of women in society and particularly the issue of women's education and social equality.

In a review of Christine's critical reception, Dietmar Rieger expresses the view that criticism of Christine as politically conservative represents an 'old strain in the reception of Christine', now replaced by an implicitly more enlightened image of her. However, much early criticism of Christine
seems to belie this statement. William Minto as early as 1886 names Christine, 'a medieval champion of her sex.' His lead is followed by Lula Richardson in 1912, Simone de Beauvoir in 1953, and Astrid Gabriel in 1955, who claims, 'Christine de Pisan was the first woman to protest in writing against the slanderous attacks of the anti-feminist authors of the Middle Ages.'

More recently the modern English translation of *La Cité des Dames* has elevated *The City of Ladies* to a loftier status. The genesis of the translation of *La Cité des Dames* as a marketing scheme by an American publishing company has ensured that recent criticism has taken place within a predominantly English speaking context. The availability of *Les Trois Vertus* only in an English edition put out by Penguin classics has had a similar effect. Most scholars writing in the area are working from an English translation rather than the original French text. The English-based reception of the text has necessarily focused criticism toward sociological and feminist readings, rather than textual criticism, which is an integral part of the critical reception of most medieval texts. This situation is also
attributable to the fact that there is still no modern French version nor any adequate critical edition of the original of either text in print.

The separation of Christine's writing on women, particularly *La Cité des Dames*, from its textual origins, has facilitated its popular adoption. Its availability only in an English translation makes it far less threatening than other medieval texts in which language barriers and complex textual variations of meaning make the task of reading and interpreting for a non-medieval scholar seem daunting and more susceptible to error and criticism. The dangers of this critical situation, where Christine's writing exists only in a modern form, are readily apparent to the medievalist. It has already given rise to a serious misunderstanding of Christine's politics, largely the result of ignorance about the cultural and historical context of her writing.

The desire to make her easily accessible to modern women has caused the problems of reading an historical text to be suppressed. The back cover of Richards' translation of *La Cité*
des Dames proudly announces, 'No Experience Necessary', advice which some critics have observed with disastrous results. For example, La Cité des Dames has been hailed by Maureen Quilligan in the New York Times Book Review as 'a militantly feminist book'. In the words of its modern translator, Earl Jeffrey Richards, it explores 'the universal suffering and oppression of women', and reveals Christine's ideology as 'profoundly feminist in that it involved a complete dedication to the betterment of women's lives...' Other scholars of the early historiographical project (to distinguish it for a moment from its literary counterpart) such as Eileen Power and Joan Kelly have also constructed Christine as a 'proto-feminist.'

On the other side of this recent feminist debate are those who maintain the comparative conservatism of Christine's politics, as compared to other intellectuals of her period. Nadia Margolis, for example, declares Christine 'could be at times surprisingly conventional in her assessment of most women's lot in life..." In a stronger vein, Sheila Delany declares that just because Christine is a woman and a writer this does not mean she was in fact a 'feminist' and believes that she is an inappropriate
role model for contemporary women writers because of her political conservatism, her 'feudal nostalgia' and 'her general toady ing' to the French court.\textsuperscript{19} Even Charity Cannon Willard, perhaps the most profuse and dedicated scholar of Christine's works, declares: 'There is no indication that Christine expected her contemporaries to do more than accept their place in society.'\textsuperscript{20}

**Christine and Early Humanism**

Much of the debate regarding Christine's supposed 'feminism' and her social and political attitudes is attributable to her historical position. Writing at the turn of the fifteenth-century, Christine lived in a period marked by the transition between the more rigid, hierarchical constructions of medieval textuality and its literary traditions, and the growing emphasis on individualism, learning and worldly attainment which humanist thought encouraged. Her Italian background and use of Italian sources add even more interest to the question of her relationship to this new mode of thought.\textsuperscript{21}

Early renaissance humanism was flourishing amongst the
intellectual circles of Paris at the start of the fifteenth-century. There are many similarities between Christian and humanist thought but their emphasis lies on different aspects of human existence. One of the distinguishing features of the humanist movement was its focus on human life in the *vita transitoria*. Unlike Christianity, whose great *auctores*, such as St Augustine, St Jerome and St Ambrose focus on salvation, transcendence and eternal bliss, humanism tended to stress the 'self-development of the individual in this earthly life'\(^{22}\), and in particular the role of the individual as 'citizen'.\(^{23}\) In humanism's initial development these two were not mutually exclusive, as William Woodward observes in his examination of early humanist thought:

But in the fifteenth century the concept of the 'perfect citizen' involved as a necessary condition that of the full development of the individual. To the humanist educator this carried the limitation of obedience to Christian faith and morality; in this way was secured a working compromise between the claims of Church, State and Personality, in the training of the 'complete man'.\(^{24}\)

All humanist writers on education dwell particularly on the
duty of religious observance and of respect for the doctrines and ordinances of the Church.

Originally an intellectual movement, early humanism concentrated its attention on the moral philosophy, poetry and history of Antiquity, and on the study of rhetoric as a means of expressing these ideas and persuading others. Almost all educational treatises defend the reading of pagan poetry by arguing that the superstitions of mythology are harmless if interpreted allegorically, and that overall most of the 'practical' virtues espoused by Christianity are common to the 'higher' type of paganism. Leonard Bruni does caution that ancient poets should be selected with discretion and Vegio declares that young boys should not read the Satirists or Comic dramatists until later in life. In the sensitive field of moral philosophy, content, as well as style was considered important but in other areas like history, style was of fundamental importance. Humanism was concerned only with the history of Ancient Rome; vernacular or recent histories were not worth considering. The medieval period was seen to have neglected many of these disciplines, necessitating a return to the ancient
worlds of classical antiquity so that the origins and sources of
the liberal arts might be re-born (in this re-naisance). As a
result of this renewed interest, the study of Latin and Greek
became a hallmark of the humanist project.

There is no doubt that the Humanists were entirely convinced of
the 'practical' character of Classical studies. Learning was not
regarded as an excuse for withdrawal from public life or as
justification of a purely contemplative existence. This was
exemplified in the saying of Cicero, much quoted in humanist
educational treatises: 'virtutis laus omnis in actione consistit.'
Learning came to be regarded as the key to humanist
advancement. Every form of self-improvement from the moral
to the social and political was available through learning.

In keeping with Aristotle, Citizenship was seen as the highest
end of education. Humanist educators shared the conviction of
the Ancients that the State should be concerned with the
training of its citizens. Education thus became a fundamental
concern of humanist thinkers, like Vives and Bruni.²⁵. The type
of learning appropriate to young men and to women became a
heavily debated topic. It is thus no accident that much of the contention surrounding Christine's 'feminism' has focused on the issue of women's education and her position on the controversial question of women's moral and intellectual capacities which lay at the foundation of the humanist debate, known as the *Querelle des femmes*.

**Christine and the *Querelle des femmes***

An examination of the *Querelle des femmes* will reveal how other intellectuals of Christine's period were addressing the questions of women's equality and social position, and will help place Christine's opinions within their contemporary historical framework.

In her essay analysing the 'feminist' debate in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Constance Jordan begins by reminding her readers that treatises composed on the subject of women were, by and large, written by, and for, teachers, intellectuals and members of the clergy - all but a few of whom were men.\(^{26}\) It is not until the end of the sixteenth-century that women such as Maire de Romieu (1591) and Rachel Speght (1617) take up the
debate for themselves, in the form of a defence of women's abilities and as a recommendation for equal educational opportunities.27

The earlier male participants, despite their common humanist philosophies, adopted a number of different and almost contradictory positions. The most progressive, like Leonardo Bruni, writing contemporaneously with Christine, typically claimed that women could embody the cardinal virtues celebrated in antiquity, as they were represented in classical history and philosophy. Some went as far as to maintain that women were as capable as men in such bastions of patriarchal power as government, scholarship, military strategy and the arts.28 The implication of this argument, Jordan contends, was 'a theoretical equality of virtue between the sexes.'29 This did not involve any attempt to change the social position of women. Childbearing, religious observance and domestic duties were still considered of primary importance but these new ideas asserted women's full humanity as citizens within the State.

Not all humanists took such an enlightened position. Many
retained traditional Aristotelian ideas of women's innate inferiority which justified their secondary status in society and the restriction of learning in women to wifely responsibilities and family related duties. Politically, humanist thought was rooted in a period that saw the 'declining power of women of rank and the enforced domestication of middle-class women.'30 The result was the confinement of women, in traditional Judeo-Graeco-Roman manner, to being the keeper of the house, the backbone of the family and the companion of man. Most feminist historians attribute this renewed restriction of women's role to the process of state formation in which the medieval monarchical hierarchy which had accorded women considerable power gradually gave way to bourgeois modes of life. The slow collapse of feudalism meant a loss of political, economic and cultural power for aristocratic women.31 Simultaneously, the separation of the work place from the home, which occurred with the rise of early capitalism, resulted in a new gender construction of the domestic 'lady' who was supported by her husband and isolated from public life within the family home. Kelly argues that the 'renascent' ideas of civic virtue in some ways made humanism 'far more narrow
in its views of women than traditional Christian culture.\textsuperscript{32} Although Christianity was misogynistic in its own way, it granted to women a spiritual equality enabling them to reach the highest states of humanity; salvation and sainthood.

Jordan seeks to explain the seemingly anomalous behaviour of many humanist thinkers, who maintained that learning was the key to earthly improvement and virtue, yet denied women the right to an education. She believes the humanist ambivalence derives from the continuing and indeed renewed respect for Aristotle, whose overt anti-feminism lay at the foundation of his much celebrated model for the State.\textsuperscript{33}

Humanism's nostalgia for classical philosophy and politics allowed Aristotle to retain his authoritative cultural position into the Renaissance. His influential arguments on women's innate inferiority underlie nearly all humanist efforts in to limit the activities of women to the domestic sphere. According to Aristotle, a woman's moral weakness necessitated her subordination to man and her removal from formalised power and public affairs. Only through the family did she achieve full
humanity and then only under the guidance of her husband. The Aristotelian hierarchy of the family consisted of the husband as the head, the wife under him and the children and servants beneath her:

For the male, unless constituted in some respect contrary to nature, is by nature more expert at leading than the female, and the elder and complete than the younger and incomplete.³⁴

This political construct of the family was seen as the fundamental unit of the State and provided a model for larger scale relationships in society, such as women's overall subordination to men, children's subordination to their elders and the lower classes' subordination to the wealthier and more powerful members of the community. It was generally maintained that the Aristotelian State reflected the natural order of humanity and, as such, it served to oppose any changes in social structure. The complete authority invested in Aristotle by writers, esteemed and powerful in their own right, assured that any argument that sought to promote women's rights at the expense of Aristotle's works was heavily disadvantaged from the start.
Most writers who wished to combat the Aristotelian construction of woman and her ordained role ignored these questions of authority and chose not to challenge Aristotle and numerous other auctores who reiterated and developed his work. Instead they sought to endorse their pro-women arguments through alternative means. Jordan orders these approaches into roughly three groups; the affirmation of women's full humanity in and through marriage, the evidence of women's abilities from their achievements in history, and the ability of education to improve women's moral and intellectual standing.

Firstly, comes the celebration of women's full humanity in marriage which Christine, herself, employs in Les Trois Vertus and La Cité des Dames. In this argument a woman is accredited with limited powers of self determination. Although she remains firmly subject to her husband's authority, she may maintain her religious practices and discourage promiscuity and gossip in her household, whatever her husband's preferences. Within marriage she is also accorded certain responsibilities. She should budget for the household (even if her husband is
spendthrift), she should oversee the education of her younger daughters, and she should be capable of running the entire household and estate economically and militarily in her husband’s absence or death.35

In La Cité des Dames we learn about several French queens who exemplify this model. Queen Fredegund, wife of King Chilperic and Queen Blanche, mother of St Louis, both ruled over France until their sons reached majority, acceding all power to them at this point. Also numerous widows are commended because they governed their jurisdictions with fairness and justice. The Countess of La Marche is just one example Christine provides of widows who ruled after their husband’s death and maintained the property, ‘in as good condition as did their husbands during their lifetime’ (35).

Christine asserts the obedience of good wives with equal vigour. In the story of Griselda, a wife passively accepts the most cruel and malicious tests her husband can devise in order to test her virtue and loyalty. She is made to hand over her children to be killed, forced to give up her position at court and
return to poverty, and finally asked to serve her husband's 'new wife' on their wedding day, only to be stripped naked in front of the guests at her husband's command. All this she does without question or resentment, causing Christine to extol her virtue and declare her to be a perfect wife. The Wife of Bernabo and Florence of Rome are forced to go to similar lengths to prove their fidelity, all with the praise and approval of Christine. She is, therefore, careful to keep the power she grants to women in marriage contained within a selfless interest for the husband's well-being. She asserts women's wide range of capabilities without overtly challenging the authority of anti-feminist constructions of women, or threatening the social fabric which relies on women's subordination to men.

Jordan's second category of argument is based on evidence in history and its implications. Examples of women's excellence and achievements in history are used to back up assertions of women's ability to participate in all aspects of society. The histories of Boccaccio and Christine belong to this category, although their arguments for women's education and civil rights are not as strong as some scholars suggest. The lack of
distinction between *fabula* (myth) and *historia* (historical fact) in all arguments of this type means that this form of reasoning can be made to run in either direction, depending on which characters are discussed. Only later, when humanist thought began to differentiate between myth and history and developed a sense of what constitutes admissible evidence could cogent arguments opposing women's inferior status be effectively mounted from this position.

As we will see, Boccaccio has little interest in seriously promoting women's issues. However, he exploits the paradoxes created by this form of argument to the full. He deliberately rejects the conventional Christian system of morality as a means of selecting women for his history. In the Introduction to *De Claris Mulieribus* he broadens the definition of 'famous' to give it 'a wider sense' than simply 'virtuous'\(^\text{37}\). Instead, he wishes 'to consider as famous those women [who]...have become renowned to the world for any sort of deed' (xxxviii). He permits himself, through this strategy, to include histories of such women as Clytaemnestra, Cleopatra, and Olympius who serve more to confirm anti-feminist views of women than rebuff them.
His ostensible praise of women is also perverted by his continual emphasis on the exceptional, 'manly' nature of the virtuous women he discusses. His celebration of the figures of Dido and Cornificia relies upon their disavowal of their femininity and their imitation of male strength, courage and dedication. Of Cornificia, he declares, 'with genius and labour she rose above her sex' (155), and, when describing Dido's achievements, 'she cast aside womanly weakness and hardened her spirit to manly strength' (87).

In *La Cité des Dames* Christine corrects Boccaccio's criteria of selection to conform to Christian standards of 'virtue'. Yet she, too, remains trapped in the paradox created by this form of historical argument. She accepts and uses the construct of the 'manly' woman, not only in reference to Dido but also to herself.\(^\text{38}\) By doing so she confirms Jordan's view that Christine has not moved beyond the acceptance of such gender-valued constructions of identity. Her exemplars remain, like Boccaccio's, isolated from the mainstream of women's history.
and anomalous in their own times.

The third common form of 'feminist' humanist argument recommended varying levels of formal humanist education for girls as a way of improving their virtue and training them for a fuller role in society which they were not able to adopt. Leonardo Bruni, and later on Vives and Erasmus were the most progressive advocates of women's education. In De Studiis et Literis (ca. 1405) which addressed the educational needs of women, Bruni extends the simple recommendation for a moral education for women, which was no longer contentious, to include a system of study which involves all fields of knowledge favoured by humanist thought, with the exception of oration and rhetorical techniques associated with public speech. History, he states 'must not on any account be neglected by one who aspires to cultivation' and in another passage describes history as a particularly good area of learning for women. A thorough knowledge of Latin is also required because it is 'the foundation of all true learning'. Latin is a subject which Christine never advocates for women.
Poetry is highly rated by Bruni, in spite of its potential dangers for women, who may be corrupted by some of the more controversial pagan poets, such as Juvenal. It is a subject 'with which every educated woman must show herself to be familiar.' Finally, powers of expression must be studied so that learning can be effectively communicated, although only within a social setting. Bruni does not dismiss the primacy of moral and religious training for women. In several places he declares strict religious observance and the practice of charitable acts to be integral to a woman's life. He believes, however, that other forms of learning will inform and advance women's understanding of edifying theological works. Classical pagan authors are perfectly acceptable. The works of Cicero and Seneca are seen as providing firm foundations in moral philosophy despite the absence of Christian perspective:

All sources of profitable learning will in due proportion claim your study. None have more urgent claim then the subjects and authors which treat of Religion and of our duties in the world; and it is because they assist and illustrate these supreme studies that I press upon your attention the words of the approved poets, historians and orators of the past.
By placing Christine within the context of developing humanist thought it is evident that her defence of women’s moral and intellectual equality with men was not unusual or particularly progressive in her own day. In the light of this information, the modern construction of her as a political campaigner for the rights of women must consequently be reviewed.

Christine and Women’s Education

Those scholars who uphold Christine as a defender and campaigner for women unanimously claim that Christine insists upon an improved education for women. Her position on this issue has become a central focus of feminist claims because of the centrality of women’s education to the debate called *La Querelle des Femmes*. Marina Warner in her foreword to the modern translation of the *La Cité des Dames* states that Christine ‘pleads for education for women’, using the humanist argument of education’s correlation with virtue. In his introduction to the English translation Earl Jeffrey Richards reiterates this point: ‘Christine insisted that women must be educated.’ Joan Kelly, in her article on the *Querelle des
Femmes, positions Christine as one of the earliest feminist theorists whose opposition to misogyny is marked 'by the demand for unbiased learning, and for women's unhindered use of it.'

Despite her difficulties with Christine's ambiguous political position regarding women, Patricia Phillippy also believes that 'at the heart of Christine's work is a program of education.'

Unfortunately Warner, Richards and Kelly all fail to provide convincing textual substantiation for their claims. It is as if they consider the educational emphasis of Christine's work to be plainly evident and in need of no further elucidation.

To see where their opinions may have come from it might be useful to look briefly at some of the more popular passages of the La Cité des Dames which are broadly considered to reveal Christine's pro-educational stance.

The story of Cornificia is one of the best known of the histories. Its function within the text is to illustrate earlier statements made by Dame Reason in a preceding dialogue about women's ability to learn:

...if it were customary to send daughters to school like sons...they would learn as thoroughly and
understand the subtleties as well as sons. (p. 63)

In the story of Cornificia we learn how a girl who was allowed to go to school studied so hard and learnt so fast that 'she surpassed her brother' (64). The tale is a powerful assertion of women's intellectual abilities but it falls short of actively advocating a co-educational system. In the passage following this statement we are told that women generally know less than men simply because they are forced to remain at home, being forbidden involvement in public affairs. After such an acknowledgement of women's social and political oppression, one would expect a call for change. Far from questioning these social limitations on women and their resulting state of ignorance Dame Reason proceeds to defend these constraints in firm and serious manner:

...the public does not require them [women] to get involved in the affairs which men are commissioned to execute...It is enough for women to perform the usual duties to which they are ordained. (pp. 63-64)

Christine does specifically address the question of women's
education on one occasion, under the promising title, 'Against those men who claim it is not good for women to be educated'; but this section tends to prove rather disappointing for most modern readers. Once again Christine acknowledges the centrality of the question of women's education to any program of social change or refutation of anti-feminist views on women but fails to defend women's right to the same education as men. She opposes those men who wish to deny women all access to education by stating the benefits of edifying religious and moral literature. However, this is as far as she is prepared to go:

For it must not be presumed that mores necessarily grow worse from knowing the moral sciences, which teach the virtues, indeed, there is not the slightest doubt that a moral education amends and ennobles them [women]. (p. 153) [my emphasis]

The education Christine is advocating is all the more unremarkable because it was the common form of learning already available to most aristocratic and gentrified women. Christine is really objecting to a further curtailment of women's education rather an expansion of it. She defends even
the small claims she makes for women's learning, as if they are in need of greater justification: '... but it should not be believed that women are the worse for knowing what is good' (153).

Once again, lack of accurate historical research and a certain amount of wish fulfilment on the part of some scholars has led to this over-estimation of Christine's position on women's education. In order to paint a more concerted 'proto-feminist' portrayal of Christine, her positive statements about women have been isolated from the rest of her work - a move which is dangerously ahistorical and leads to the inaccuracies we have seen. Her writing presents a wholistic approach to the question of women, reflecting a typically medieval desire to encapsulate all aspects of the debate. The appealing elements of one text, or story cannot be viewed in isolation from the rest of her work without the risk of distorting Christine's overall view of the capabilities of her sex.

It can be argued that although Christine does not openly advocate a complete education for women, her stories about the achievements of learned women imply her approval of, and
desire for, such a program. Christine's emphasis on the intellectual accomplishments of women in all areas of the arts and sciences is undeniable evidence of her belief in the equal intellectual capabilities of men and women which was contended in the *Querelle des Femmes*, and in women's ability to reach the top of their field and contribute substantially to the body of human knowledge. The histories of Nicaula, Hortensia, Zenobia, Leontium, Proba, Sappho and many others all demonstrate women's ability to excel in learning of all kinds. As Kelly points out, Christine even presents 'a compelling case for the female origins of culture and civilisation.' Yet these ideas are contained by her social and political conservatism. In spite of numerous opportunities, Christine never advocates a full education for women. It cannot even be said that Christine seeks to educate women by example, as Susan Groag Bell proposes. The stories Christine narrates are certainly inspiring, but the readers are not encouraged to imitate the feats of these women. In fact, the pagan origins of most of the women would make such suggestions inappropriate. The attainments of the Christian exemplars Christine includes are also beyond the reach of most of Christine's aristocratic
readers, who had little opportunity for true martyrdom at the frivolous court of Queen Isabeau.

Kelly's discussion of Christine's use of exemplary women typifies the problems of historical inaccuracy and almost wilful misreading which were raised in Alkalay-Gut's essay, discussed in Chapter One. Kelly's statements are blatantly incorrect. They reveal the extent, whether conscious or unconscious, to which some feminist historicists are prepared to go to protect the image of Christine:

Casting out all of Boccaccio's notions of the 'manly' and 'exceptional' character of women's historic achievement, she [Christine] used his biographies to validate a wholly positive notion of women's nature.49

Not only does Kelly ignore Christine's explanations of Dido's new name, as connoting 'the woman who has the strength and force of a man', but she omits Christine's own comments that denigrate women's usual occupations. In speaking of Cornificia, Christine declares, like Boccaccio, that in order to succeed in her study Cornificia neglected 'all other feminine activities.' On
another occasion in the text she refers to women's traditional work as 'spinning and girlish silliness' (155).

Christine is vulnerable to the same charges made by Constance Jordan against her source, Boccaccio - that the histories 'discourage rather than encourage emulation.'50 This is not to say that the examples Christine provides have no relevance to her contemporary readers. As will be seen in more detail in the second part of this chapter Christine takes a good deal of trouble to establish the usefulness of both the pagan and Christian exemplars to her audience. But just as she fails throughout her writing to recommend her own life as a model for women, so she is content to demonstrate women's intellectual capabilities without expecting or encouraging women to do more than fulfil their ordained domestic roles in society.

In her article on Christine's image of herself as a studious woman Susan Groag Bell attempts to address Christine's anomalous failure to recommend to other women the education which served her so well. Bell does literary somersaults to be
both historically accurate and explain Christine's attitude to women's education but the arguments that result are confusing. She seeks initially to retain some concept of Christine as an advocate of women's education by arguing, as I previously mentioned, that one of the major aims of *La Cité des Dames* is to 'educate other women by example.' Referring to the claims that Christine overtly calls for improved learning for women, Bell admits 'the strongest suggestions concerning the education of women, ...are asides amid the histories of the *Cité des Dames.*' Christine's reluctance to educate women is made more incongruous because no explanation can be found in her own experiences as a scholarly woman. Christine's contemporaries are not recorded as opposing her position as court poet or her participation in the intellectual circles of Paris. Bell is left to conclude, in what to me is an unconvincing argument, that either Christine failed to recommend an education for women on the basis of her own sense of isolation and alienation as a scholarly woman, or that Christine viewed the traditional work of women as of equal importance to the running of society as the more powerful and educated jobs:

Thus one reason for Christine's
failure to recommend a life of scholarship to other women may have been her appreciation of society's need for conventional women's work.54

Phillippy also grasps at this explanation, stating Christine saw "women's work" as the thread which keeps society intact.55 She remains cautious about this assertion, however, and admits that at times Christine disparages conventional female occupations.

Sheila Delany immediately picks up on this line of argument which she views as a form of women's oppression based on political expediency. She argues that Christine is far from a campaigner for women's rights. She states that Christine in no way attempts to re-evaluate women's position of powerlessness in society or change the social structure, based on men's dominance of women.56 She does not encourage women to become educated because women do not require an education to fulfil their assigned roles in patriarchal society. In fact, an education may make women dissatisfied with their given functions in society and threaten social stability. From her various political and patriotic treatises we know that Christine abhorred the idea of any form of social uprising or challenge to
the monarchy. In keeping with her materialist analysis, Delany upholds Boccaccio as more of a crusader for women’s education than Christine because he harshly criticises the narrow domestic aspirations of women who have the ability to achieve those things for which men attain power and fame (Cornificia p.188). Such a position does involve an acceptance of Boccaccio’s denigration of women’s familial and domestic roles that many feminists reject.

Through the articulation of these views in the widely read feminist journal, *Signs*, Delany effectively deflates the growing popularist notions of Christine which seem to have outgrown the historical reality of the woman herself; a mythology which Maureen Quilligan in her review in the *New York Times* and Judy Chicago through her multi-media art exhibition and book have enhanced and reinforced without any textual substantiation or historical evidence. Additionally, Delany has continued the debate amongst more serious scholars who are determined to cast Christine in a positive light and interpret even her most troublesome writing about women in an ideologically favourable manner. She is, consequently, critical
of Groag Bell's psychologising attempts to explain and exonerate Christine's failure to endorse women's education; it risks misreading Christine's works in order to retain our image of this woman in its present splendour.

In her review of Enid McLeod's book on Christine in *Signs* Delany's harsh appraisal of the political aspects of Christine's writing instigated a debate of its own. Arlyn Diamond and Susan Groag Bell, associated with the feminist historiographic program which seeks to recuperate historical women, separately complained to *Signs* about Delany's article. Bell's main criticism of Delany's review is that 'she appears to ignore the revival of scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic of the last three decades which is beginning to rehabilitate Christine de Pizan, revealing a great deal more about her both as a literary figure and as a woman of her day.' She is eager to salvage Christine from Delany's description of her as 'a pompous, reactionary sycophant', and promote the assessment of her as an early feminist. Correspondingly, she condemns Delany's omission of the 'feminist themes' that she believes 'run through all her autobiographical writing from *Le Livre de la
Madding de fortune to Le Livre du chemin de longue étude, to the prayers and encouragement addressed to the widows of the Hundred Years War.\textsuperscript{63} Her implication is that Delany has not kept abreast of recent criticism, or she too, would view Christine in a more sympathetic light.

Arlyn Diamond's reply is more extreme and expresses outrage that a journal which is a forum for feminist scholarship should have published an article 'as contemptuous and unhelpful' as Delany's.\textsuperscript{64} Again, what is criticised is not Delany's review of McLeod's book, which Bell, Diamond and Delany all agree is too generalised, naive and simplistic (Diamond does not even question Delany's qualitative statements about Christine's writing, which she compares unfavourably to the work of Marie de France, Heloise and Margery Kempe. Her main disagreement is with Delany's estimation of Christine's 'feminism'. She defends Christine's attack on Jeun de Meun in the Querelle de la Rose, which Delany contends was based on 'narrow moralistic grounds'\textsuperscript{65} and justifies much of Christine's political conservatism by pointing to her 'vulnerabl[e]' position at court and her dependence on royal favour. Her concluding statement
that 'no woman (as no man) can be dismissed as unworthy of our interest' exemplifies the potential dangers of the feminist historicist project, which at times, is so anxious to restore to women their past that its scholars fail to be sufficiently critical of their chosen literary foremothers.66

Delany's response to these letters is equally direct.67 She dismisses much of Diamond's argument as 'ad feminam persiflage' and refutes Groag Bell's insinuations about her ignorance of recent feminist criticism on medieval women by pointing to her own contributions in the area which adopt 'a sociological approach to the question of women in literature.'68 Her argument is not, she writes, that Christine is 'unworthy of our interest' but that a marxist analysis reveals a different image of Christine, one that is far more concerned with Christine's elitism and defence of patriarchal power structures than recent feminist constructions of her have cared to address.

Christine's Conservatism in other works

Christine's other writing is even more conservative in respect
to its views on women. Critics who wish to portray Christine as a campaigner for women often ignore the rest of her oeuvre and choose to look only at La Cité des Dames. Even its companion text, Les Trois Vertus, which also deals exclusively with women's issues, has been largely untouched by feminist critics because of the absence of any call for the improvement of women's position. These two 'women oriented' texts were both written comparatively late in her career, when she was forty or more, and mark a progression in her thoughts on women: Susan Schibanoff is probably quite correct in attributing these texts to Christine's experience in the Querelle de la Rose, which she 'left' in 1402.69 If we look back at her earlier writing we discover a political stance which completely undercuts recent claims for her radicalism. Le Livre du corps de policie and L'Avisson-Christine both display her belief in hereditary monarchist rule and the danger of granting ordinary citizens the power to make political decisions, or any control over social and legal change. The L'Epistre d'Othea a Hector, written five years before La Cité des Dames articulates her acceptance of the institutionalised power structure of society and reveals, as well, an attitude to women which conforms to the most
traditional patriarchal constructions of gender.\textsuperscript{70}

The \textit{Othea} was written as an educational treatise for her son, Jean. It is comprised of one hundred chapters, each of which is divided into three parts, 'texte', 'glose', and 'allegorie', a format which embodies all the textual conventions of moral argument. The 'texte' is a short narrative from classical mythology. It is followed by a 'glose' which expands and explains the passage using edifying quotations from classical \textit{auctores} of morality and philosophy (for example, Socrates, Aristotle, Hermes, Pythagoras) and concludes with an 'allegorie', reinforced with quotations from Church Fathers and other ecclesiastical authorities (like Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine). Her writing embraces patriarchal authority in all its major forms; political, philosophical and religious and advocates these views to her son.

In 1980, Christine Reno argued that there were 'feminist aspects' of the \textit{Othea}.\textsuperscript{71} The partial sense of the claim - 'aspect' denoting specific elements of a text rather than a wholistic concept - is well chosen because her essay addresses only
certain select parts of the text. Reno argues that Christine 'modifies a number of her sources so as to present certain female characters in a favourable light' and also 'reinforc[es] the positive roles assigned women characters in the narratives.' Reno points out changes Christine has made to some of the mythological accounts in her writing and shows how the stories of Daphne, Penthesilea and Io are rewritten by Christine to present a more positive image of these figures. However, this argument ignores the other two sections of each chapter which interpret these stories from a traditional, patriarchal perspective and determinedly overlooks the treatment of other women in Christine's text. When these other 'aspects' of the Othea are taken into account, Reno's rehabilitation of Christine's text becomes strained and unconvincing.

Susan Schibanoff, despite her overall defence of Christine's 'feminism', describes Christine's authorial position in the Othea as that of a 'patristic exegete'. Far from being 'feminist' in its stance, she regards Christine's authorial position as concertedly masculinist. Christine's portrayal of Criseyde is
particularly negative. In keeping with common anti-feminist constructions of the corrupting powers of women she warns virtuous men to avoid 'such a lady as Criseyde was.' Her treatment of Circe in the Othea is even more detrimental to any feminist reading and provides an interesting contrast to the later portrait of the same character in La Cité des Dames. Using the traditional version of the story, which Boccaccio adopts in De Claris Mulieribus, Christine, in the Othea, presents a picture of Circe as an evil woman who led men astray. Similarly, her description of Leontium resembles the anti-feminist accounts of Cicero and Jean de Montreuil (who later compares Christine to 'the Greek whore, Leontium' during the Querelle) rather than her revised presentation of her in La Cité des Dames. It is not just in the 'texte' that these attitudes to women are to be found. The 'allegorie' accompanying these narratives is described by Schibanoff as 'an interpretation or re-reading of the text according to patriarchal constructions of the female. She accepts the categorisation of women as 'good' (that is chaste, modest, humble, silent) or 'evil' (that is outspoken, unfaithful whatever the circumstances, anomalous, sexual) and
reinforces these definitions of women in her writing.

Christine's earlier work is thus even less conducive to a feminist reading than *La Cité des Dames*, which shows a greater consciousness and disapproval of traditional anti-feminist constructions of women. The transition which Christine went through in the time between the writing of the *Othea* and *La Cité des Dames* coincides with her participation in the *Querelle de la Rose*. This debate essentially centred on the attitudes to marriage and sexual morality articulated in Jean de Meun's additions to the popular thirteenth-century poem. Christine and her most famous ally, Jean Gerson, criticised these additions as immoral, lascivious, frivolous, denigrating to women and destructive of the institution of marriage.\(^{76}\) Christine's participation in the *Querelle* is one of the strongest foundations for her title as a 'proto-feminist' and so it is important to examine briefly her participation in the debate and her writing on women which developed out of it.

Joan Kelly describes Christine's role in the *Querelle* as 'an intervention on behalf of women.'\(^{77}\) She bases her claim on the
fact that Christine did not defend herself as an individual but made common cause with all women. Certainly by the end of her participation in the Querelle the personal insults she receives on the subject of her gender are enough to provoke her into sending a letter to the queen asking for support against 'some false opinions denigrating the honour and fair name of women.' However, in the rest of Christine's writing she never again attempts to engage support for women's issues.

Others have interpreted her contribution to the Querelle as serving only to reveal Christine's moral and political conservatism. Joseph Baird and John Kane, the latest editors of the Querelle material, caution against those who wish to see Christine as a 'vociferous fourteenth century women's liberationist.'

Christine looks backward rather than forward; she is conservative (one might say reactionary), not revolutionary. She looks back with nostalgia to the medieval cors d'amours and to idealised chivalry, and if such never did ever really exist, that fact does not, of course, lessen the force of her vision.
Beatrice Gottlieb goes further, suggesting the presentation of the *Querelle de la Rose* as a 'feminist' debate is altogether misplaced: 'We know that Christine thought it [the *Roman de la Rose*] was particularly insulting to women, but that was not the focus of the debate, although she herself pursued the point.'

Gerson, her ally, makes no reference to its denigration of women and Gottlieb insists it is also inaccurate to describe Christine's contribution to the *Querelle* as primarily an attack on anti-feminism because 'it is not clear whether she thought that Jean de Meun's chief offence was against women or propriety.'

Christine's criticism of Jean de Meun is seen by Delany, too, as based on 'narrow moralistic grounds,' in keeping with strict Christian values, displaying no evidence of a humanist or feminist consciousness. Her position has been described as 'typically medieval' by Gottlieb in as much as she makes no attempt to address the wider issues of anti-feminism but seeks only to confront threats to the institution of marriage and women's ability to conduct themselves chastely and honourably.

It is in the *Querelle* that, for the first time, Christine is
attacked by a contemporary intellectual on the basis of her sex. After receiving Christine's detailed complaints about Jean de Meun's text, Gontier Col disparages her argument by calling her a 'woman impasioned' who has chosen to criticise this great master 'out of presumption or arrogance.'

Christine's self-interested motive for defending women's moral and intellectual abilities in _La Cité des Dames_ reflects both the awakening of her consciousness regarding women and its immediate limitations. Her 'pro-women' stance, such as it is, stems only from her own personal experiences of misogyny and does not extend beyond a self-interested defence of women which serves her private purposes. In neither her early works nor her more advanced writing on women does Christine approach the progressive paradigms for women's education being articulated by humanist educators, or comprehensively challenge the traditional construction of gender of which she herself was a victim during the _Querelle_. Although she devotes several books to the subject of women, even this specialised writing is far from advanced when compared to the ideas being expressed by some humanist thinkers of her day with whom she
was familiar.

Consequently, in her political outlook, she cannot be viewed as anything but conservative; both in her overt support of institutionalised power structures and in her attitude to what we now call 'gender politics'. As Delany notes in her challenge to Christine's celebrity status, the fact that Christine talks about and addresses women is not enough, in itself, to warrant the claims of militant feminism made for her by those who are more concerned with the popularist revival of medieval women writers than with historical accuracy.
SECTION TWO

Although Christine remains politically conservative on the question of women, her writing reflects a highly gendered challenge to the dominant textual practices of her day. Textually, we can observe an enormous change in Christine's writing from complete acceptance of patriarchal modes of writing and power in her early works to a more self-defined notion of authority and the assertion of her own identity as a woman writer in _La Cité des Dames_. This section will examine these changes in Christine's writing and provide a new way of understanding Christine's writing and her role as a literary model.

When the _La Cité des Dames_ opens we find "Christine" reading a book in an ideal, Woolfian 'room of her own'. Her description of the study is important to the introduction of _La Cité des Dames_ because it establishes the perspective from which she will be building and defending a retreat for women. The intrusion of
her mother's call for supper enhances the image of "Christine". She portrays herself as both a serious thinker, working in solitude and also as an 'average' woman, a daughter leaving her work to share a meal with her family. The "Christine" of the narrative must be separated here from the author of the story, despite the many similarities between the two. The character of "Christine" is a tool of the narrative which allows the text to present both sides of the argument for and against women's intellectual and moral capacities. Even if we want to go so far as to suggest, as Susan Schibanoff does, that La Cité des Dames may be read as a quasi-autobiographical work in which 'the extreme emasculation of the fictional reader, "Christine", reflects in part its author's early experiences,' the two Christines must not be completely assimilated.85

Christine authorises her re-evaluation of women's abilities by constructing a two tiered power structure in her book. The success of her exemplar and her more general discussions on women's abilities relies on the dialogue between concrete experience, embodied in the persona of "Christine" and transcendent truth, manifested in the figures of the three
virtues. In this way "Christine", as the voice of common experience (a type of 'everywoman') is able to ask contentious questions about women and receive an answer from an authority which exists independently of her own narrative presence. The figures of the virtues, through their role as intermediaries between heaven and earth serve to represent the truth as it exists beyond the temporal world and provide answers that are invested with an indisputable authority. This textual construct allows Christine to present her opinions on the intellectual and moral equality of women without having to reveal herself, a woman, as the authorising voice of the text. "Christine", the character in the text, is therefore able to seek advice innocently on such issues as women's learning:

But please enlighten me again, as to whether it has ever pleased God...to honour the feminine sex with the great privilege of the virtue of high learning, and whether women ever have a clever enough mind for this. (p. 63)

The answer she receives is much quoted by those critics who wish to portray Christine as an advocate of women's education but it is never acknowledged that the answer is not provided by
"Christine" but put in the mouth of Dame Reason:

...if it were customary to send daughters to school like sons, and if they were then taught the natural sciences, they would learn as thoroughly and understand all the subtleties of all the arts and sciences as well as sons. (p. 63)

This is not to say that Christine disassociates herself from this point of view. On the contrary, by attributing such controversial statements to Dame Reason Christine attempts to invest these ideas with greater credibility, although she does not develop them politically. The very origin and founding cause of the City is placed in the hands of the visionary women. They do not appear at "Christine's" request but because they have chosen her to act as their mouthpiece on Earth: 'Thus, fair daughter, the prerogative among women has been bestowed on you to establish and build the City of Ladies' (11). Christine, like Margery, claims to derive her authority to write from an external and unquestionable source. Boccaccio, both his name and his text, allow her to position herself within the scholarly humanist discourse of her day, but she claims her inspiration and power to write derive from external, even supernatural
sources.

The description of "Christine" in the opening of the _La Cité des Dames_ stands in sharp contrast to the construction of 'woman' in the book she now commences to read. The text which "Christine" accidentally picks up from her desk is a copy of _Les Lamentations de Mathéolus_; a work which "Christine" assures us she did not buy, but was given as a gift. It is not of classical origin but one that is virtually contemporary with Jeun de Meun's controversial additions to the _Roman de la Rose_ in 1277. Mathéolus was writing about ten years later and his book was translated from its original Latin into French seventy years after that. It typifies in many ways the medieval vilification of women. It warns of the dangers of marriage, especially to the clergy, of whom Mathéolus is one, who stand to lose their sinecures if they marry, as well as their freedom and happiness and it predictably reveals a traditional loathing for the female body and for women's sexuality in all its manifestations. Although, "Christine" declares, 'it was of no authority' (3), she is still deeply perturbed by the prevalence and consistency of these anti-feminist constructions of
Not only one or two and not even just this Mathéolus (for this book had a bad name anyway and was intended as a satire) but, more generally, judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all orators - it would take too long to mention their names - it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth. They all concur in one conclusion: that the behaviour of women is inclined to and full of every vice. (p. 4)

At the start of La Cité des Dames we quickly see "Christine" moved from an idyllic environment where her identity as a woman and a writer are unified, into a state where she begins to despair not only of her own capabilities but about the supposed inferiority of all her sex. Weighed down by an entire legacy of anti-feminism in the male literary tradition "Christine" begins to doubt her own experiences of women's worth. She symbolically re-enacts the literary paralysis experienced by women writers participating in the literary tradition. Filled with despair "Christine" suffers a fear analogous to the 'anxiety of authorship' formulated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, a radical form of self-doubt which
extends further than her identity as a writer to her fundamental sense of self worth as a woman. Her sources from both the classical and medieval periods are the very auctores who attempt to silence her and deny her not only a voice but any sense of intellectual or moral equality. She even becomes tempted to agree with Mathéolus in his assessment of women, so powerful is the tradition of anti-feminism. Thus she comes perilously close to the androcentric trap of the literary tradition. Through its assumption of its own normalcy and its dominance of textuality, it nearly causes "Christine" to abandon her own intuitive views of women and assimilate the anti-feminism of the canon into her own image of women. She is enticed to think and feel no longer as a woman, but as a man. Thus she comes to hate and despise her own body: 'I considered myself most unfortunate because God had made me inhabit a female body' (5).

The prevalence of such views of women makes "Christine" determined to investigate these accusations from her perspective as a woman and reveal them as false: 'I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman and,
similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept...’ (5). Although "Christine" discovers that she 'could not see or realise how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behaviour of women', she is unable to compete against the overwhelming tide of anti-feminism generated by her community's authorised male writers:

Yet still I argued vehemently against women, saying it would be impossible that so many famous men - such solemn scholars, possessed of such deep and great understanding, so clear sighted in all things, as it seemed - could have spoken so falsely on so many occasions that I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was. This reason alone, in short, made me conclude that my intellect did not perceive my own great faults... (p. 4)

We must, of course acknowledge a large degree of irony in the narrative at this point. The views are not those of Christine, herself, who has overcome these inhibiting constructions of women and no longer fears her incapacity to write. The heavily Latinate prose style with its hyperbolic piling of one phrase
upon another mocks the convoluted prose of classical *auctores*
and their medieval imitators. It is only the "Christine" of the
text who remains awed by their pronouncements, thus provoking
the arrival of the visionary women to teach her and the readers
the error of their ways.

"Christine's" self-identification as an innately inferior
creature, the result of her reading, leaves her helpless and
defeated until the visionary arrival of the three allegorical
women. Symbolically, it is only when "Christine" puts down the
book and turns to God for consolation that she proves herself
worthy to receive the visions for the City. By appealing to the
greatest male authority of all and placing even revered writers
under his jurisdiction "Christine" reveals herself to possess
'enough understanding' to be able to perceive Dame Reason and
her companions. These visionary women are of Christian origin
(we are told they inhabit the kingdoms of both heaven and earth)
and impose an undeniable Christian framework upon Christine's
book, as will be seen more clearly in a comparison with
Boccaccio's text. In their names and advice they are, however,
surprisingly secular, offering advice in worldly prudence; a
virtue which becomes increasingly important in *Les Trois Vertus*.

As allegorical representations of Reason, Rectitude and Justice they resemble a peculiarly humanist set of virtues. From the start the philosophical and political ambivalence of the text is revealed. The founders of the city reflect a dual perspective incorporating both late medieval notions of Christian morality and the rising influence of the civic order of humanism. Through her choice of the Virtues Christine implicitly appeals to humanism as providing the impetus and intellectual grounding for her forthcoming claims about women's abilities, but she keeps such ideas carefully contained by subordinating them to the divine will.

The visionary women urge "Christine" to place her trust only in what conforms to her own experience. They are adamant about her need to reject her identification with anti-feminist authors and trust once again in her own perceptions. In stating their reasons for appearing to "Christine", Dame Reason declares:

We have come to bring you out of
ignorance which so blinds your intellect that you shun what you know for a certainty and believe what you do not know or see or recognise except by virtue of strange opinions. (p. 6)

Her disparagement of common anti-feminist auctoritates as 'strange opinions' is forthright and daring. The assessment of Mathéolus' denigration of marriage and similar views expressed in other contemporary texts, specifically the Roman de la Rose, is equally abrupt. In keeping with the Christian-based criticism she employs in her arguments in the Querelle de la Rose, she accuses them of coming dangerously close to 'heresy' (7) and completely dismisses their claims: 'I believe that, regardless of what you might read, you will never see such a husband with your own eyes, so badly coloured are these lies' (7-8).

Christine and the Male Literary Tradition

The vehement dismissal of "Christine's" initial androcentricity is controversial for two reasons. Firstly, because it exhorts "Christine" to trust more in her own experiences as a woman than in the authorised opinions of her literary forefathers. In order to build a city in which 'ladies and all valiant women may
have a refuge and defence against the (sic) various assailants' (10). Christine needs to create a space within the male literary tradition which does not compromise the 'well founded walls' designed to protect women from their 'jealous enemies.' The imagery of the high walls and strong defences which protect the City confirms its construction as a fortress. Dame Reason makes it clear that the City needs to be able to defend itself against any siege from its enemies. It is designed to keep antifeminists out as well as unite virtuous women. Such metaphors show that Christine's book involves a defensive textual strategy, not just an affirmative one. The enemies mentioned are the very opponents Christine faced in her participation in the Querelle de la Rose. She is told explicitly that she cannot draw upon these authors who have slandered women:

So throw aside these black, dirty uneven stones from your work, for they will never be fitted into the fair edifice of your City. (p. 18)

Instead she must depend upon her own instinctive knowledge and the advice of Reason, Rectitude and Justice.

Secondly, via the authority of these visionary women who are
invested with power from God and therefore not to be mocked or challenged by the readers, Christine questions the validity of venerated authors in a period which accepted the auctoritates of these writers as fragments of Truth. In La Cité des Dames Christine does not simply counteract anti-feminist arguments with examples of exemplary women, although much of her book is concerned with this exercise. Rather, as Joan Kelly puts it, 'Christine begins to investigate as well as rebut misogyny.'90 Kelly declares that by learning about the different reasons for men's anti-feminism from Dame Reason, Christine is able to now see 'the venerated men of learning not only as human but as male, necessarily viewing women from their own subjective sexual position.'91 Through Reason's explanation we learn that although some writers have attacked women 'with good intentions', other men have criticised women for less valid reasons:

...such reproach has occurred to some men because of their own vices and others have been moved by the defects of their own bodies, others through pure jealousy, still others by the pleasure they derive in their own personalities from slander. (pp. 17-18)
Thus we are informed that Ovid began to attack women because in his youth he 'dissipated his body in every vanity and pleasure of the flesh' and was later castrated for his 'excessive promiscuity', thus causing him to make women who were no longer available to him, 'unattractive to others' (21). The anti-feminist writings of Cecco d'Ascoli, Cato Uticensis and the author of *Secreta Mulierum* are similarly accounted for and dismissed (pp. 22-26). This undercutting of authority is made more controversial by the fact that Christine's rather violent and vengeful stories are untrue. They are powerful narrative techniques necessary to remove any obligation for "Christine" to utilise these *auctores*.

Reason's rejection of traditional scholars' opinions raises the question of which sources women writers are able to rely upon. A debate has arisen around this very issue involving Joan Kelly, Nadia Margolis and Charity Cannon Willard, each of whom adopts a different position regarding the sources available to Christine and her ability to reclaim them from their anti-feminist origins.\(^2\)
The choice of Boccaccio as her primary source for *La Cité des Dames* is in itself a sign of Christine's awareness of the inappropriateness of the more traditional classical sources for her project. Boccaccio was not a classical authority but a reputable scholar, writing barely fifty years before Christine. *De Claris Mulieribus* was written between 1355 and 1359. Boccaccio was a humanist, an Italian, and he had himself composed 'the first collection of biographies exclusively of women.' An examination of Christine's textual relationship to Boccaccio as it has been read by modern critics will serve as an interesting introduction to Christine's relationship to her source and the ways in which her use of Boccaccio has been constructed.

In a recent article Susan Schibanoff discusses the force exerted on our understanding of women writers by the androcentric literary tradition. She states that we are 'encouraged to nudge Christine's City under Boccaccio's wing.' Such readings are seen by Schibanoff as 'a particularly pervasive type of androcentric bias among professional readers [which] takes the form of enroling women writers as pupils in the schools of male
writers.' The same 'great expectations' are aroused by the newly-discovered manuscript of Margery Kempe's work which R. W. Chambers anticipates will follow in the footsteps of Hilton's Scale of Perfection. Inevitably such readings are forcefully fulfilled at the expense of Margery and Christine de Pisan's originality.

In his introduction to the English translation Richards explains that Alfred Jeanroy, a French critic who first analysed Christine's relationship to Boccaccio in 1922, sought only to establish parallels between the two texts. Like Christine's contemporary critics he seems to have mistaken Christine's lack of fidelity to Boccaccio's text as an inability to translate the details and complexities of Boccaccio's narrative into her own work. Carla Bozzolo, whom Richard also mentions, sees Christine as adapting Boccaccio's text to a 'more concise moral purpose.' For Richards, this marks the start of a new analysis of the connection between the two texts which moves from seeing the La Cité des Dames almost as a paraphrase of Boccaccio's text, to constituting a 'correction' of it. Richards agrees with Schibanoff that it is 'precisely this aspect of
Christine's reception of Boccaccio [which] has hitherto been somewhat neglected in scholarly discussion.\textsuperscript{98} However, although Richards acknowledges how 'profoundly Christine remoulded Boccaccio' he still sees her work as primarily indebted to Boccaccio's text, granting it little or no textual autonomy.\textsuperscript{99}

Despite similarities in content, the versions of women's history constructed by Boccaccio and Christine are vastly different. There are two main points of divergence which exemplify the alterity of Christine's text: the textual ambitions of the authors and the irreconcilable disparity of their positions within the dominant textual tradition of their time.

In his preface to \textit{De Claris Mulieribus}, Boccaccio claims to write his book for the edification of women: 'I think it is both useful and necessary that the accomplishments of these women please women no less than men.' In the dedication of his work to the Countess of Altvalla he emphasises the didactic aspect of his writing further: 'Nor will the reading have been in vain... if by emulating the deeds of ancient women you spur your spirit to
loftier things' (xxxiv). Some critics concur with Boccaccio about the aims of his text. Susan Groag Bell for example hails *De Claris Mulieribus* as 'probably the first Italian humanist work to concern itself entirely with the improvement of women's minds.'\textsuperscript{100} Yet, in my opinion, there is little evidence within the text to support these lofty claims.

In his introduction, Boccaccio declares that he has written his book specifically for women by broadening the stories into more explanatory histories, capable of being understood even by those without an education in history, but the very fact that he writes in Latin exposes and disrupts this pretence. Even the most educated women amongst his readers were unlikely to be versed in Latin.\textsuperscript{101} It is still a matter of dispute whether Christine herself had fluent access to this vital language that was the textual symbol of humanist discourse. It is probable that, like Chaucer, Christine was largely reliant on a vernacular translation of Boccaccio's book for her own reading of his work.\textsuperscript{102}

This choice of language is one of the inconsistencies that
Christine addresses in her own work. Following the example of Dante, Christine writes in the vernacular, composing, of course in French rather than Italian because of her audience.\textsuperscript{103} By doing so she reveals her awareness of the Italian debate on the vernacular instigated by Dante. Speaking against the artificiality of Latin which dominated the literary production of the time, Dante emphasises the responsibility of the writer to his mother tongue, to which both writer and reader have a natural affinity. For Christine this argument takes on a more specific gendered value. The vernacular is a natural language available to men and women alike. Latin, on the other hand is the carefully guarded key to patriarchal textuality, reserved only for the literary élite and, hence, an exclusively masculine language. The work of Walter Ong on the implications of literacy confirms this point of view:

For well over a thousand years, it [Latin] was sex-linked, a language written and spoken only by males, learned outside the home in a tribal setting, complete with physical punishment and other kinds of deliberately imposed hardships. It had no connection with anyone’s unconscious of the sort that mother tongues, learned in infancy, always have.\textsuperscript{104}
Latin, like other school-learned languages, was completely artificial. It was never the first language of an individual and it was controlled almost exclusively by writing. Male control of the education system ensured that Latin was available only to men (and only to men of a certain class), thus preserving the masculine monopoly over textuality. Christine seizes upon the 'unnaturalness' of Latin to demonstrate Boccaccio's contradictory use of it in a text supposedly designed for women readers. By consciously making her text linguistically more accessible to women through her use of the vernacular she draws attention to the hidden audience that lies behind Boccaccio's choice of Latin.

The narrowness of Boccaccio's readership is further exposed by the self-imposed comparison of his text to the work of Petrarch. The preface of De Claris Mulieribus commences by making parallels with Petrarch's De Viris Illustribus, which deals with the heroic exploits of famous men. By doing this, Boccaccio positions his text as a contribution to the intellectual humanist circle in which he moved. This
relationship is again emphasised in the conclusion where Boccaccio asks forgiveness for any errors of judgment he may have made. Once again his speech is not directed towards his female audience but to 'the wiser men' who read his work and are in a position to 'correct what has been improperly written' (251). Therefore, although Boccaccio ostensibly invites a female audience, he goes on to reveal that they are of secondary importance to the book's educated male readers.

Boccaccio's fundamental androcentricity permeates the narrative voice within the history as well. He cannot resist including irrelevant details about the sexual activities of the women he seeks to praise. Not even Penelope, commonly considered the most chaste of all classical women, is allowed to escape Boccaccio's narration untempered. He recounts the traditional version of Penelope's patient devotion, but is unable to finish the story without any sexual innuendo: 'But Lycophron, a very late Greek poet, says that old Nauplius...persuaded Penelope to commit adultery with one of her suitors' (83). After having deliberately cast aspersions on her virtue, Boccaccio is eager to distance himself from the accusations and retain his
persona as a defender of women: 'Far be it for me to believe that Penelope...was anything but chaste just because one writer states the opposite' (83). However, he persists in questioning the virtue of such other women as Hypsipyle, Medusa, Circe, Leaena and Leontium, all of whom Christine liberates from such sensationalism in her accounts.

Similarly, many of the morals Boccaccio is so fond of extrapolating from the stories are obviously aimed at a male readership. In the story of Iole, Boccaccio concludes with specifically male-oriented advice on how to avoid the trickery of women:

We must therefore be vigilant and arm our hearts with great strength, so that we are not overcome against our wishes. First a man must resist. (p. 46) [Emphasis mine]

In his tale of Dido he dwells extensively on the evils of remarriage for women. The virtue of Dido who preferred to die rather than 'forgo her chastity' is compared to the carnal lust of most other women:
A third woman will come and say that she had to marry again because her parents forced her... as if we did not know that if her unbridled lust had not spurred her... she would have overcome everything with a single denial. Dido was willing to die in order not to live dishonourably, but this woman could not refuse marriage in order to live honourably. (p. 91)

In the case of Medea, Boccaccio labours the moral of the story with even more vigour and at greater length than he affords the tale itself. The cautionary and harshly critical character of the advice, as Phillippy observes, 'further disrupts a perception of the work as providing exemplary figures for women to follow.'

The omission of Christian viragos from his collection of stories again challenges the didactic function of his work. Boccaccio justifies his decision on two grounds. Initially, he argues, 'this was done because it seemed that they [Christian and pagan women] could not very well be placed side by side and that they did not strive for the same goal' (xxxviii). He then adds there was no need to include stories of virtuous Christian women because they already 'have been described in special books'
(xxxix). The latter argument contradicts his previous intention to design his book specifically for uninformed women readers. If, as he also initially contends, Christian women are excluded because they seek different goals from pagan women, then one wonders how the morals to be derived from the actions of pagan women can be relevant to contemporary women readers. The simple links Boccaccio attempts to make between the women of classical antiquity and the women of his own time are problematised, diminishing the supposed pleasure and direct benefit the stories are to provide.

In his conclusion, Boccaccio completes the suppression of the female readership of his work. He finishes his stories with the example of a contemporary woman, Joanna, rumoured to have taken Boccaccio as her lover. He refuses to include any other contemporary figures, however, because 'the number of illustrious ones is so small' (251). A more likely explanation is to be found in Boccaccio's deference to the humanist tradition of scholarship of the time. Boccaccio may be seen as excluding contemporary women, Richards suggests, because they are not discussed in the Latin auctores to which Boccaccio defers both
in his direct address to the readers (in the Preface and Conclusion) and in his narrative fidelity to their versions of the histories he recounts:

Clearly Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, Servius, Flavius, Josephus, Valerius, Maximus, Augustine, and Orosius were not in any position to dismiss Boccaccio's contemporaries. Lacking their authority, Boccaccio seems to have simply concluded that the only illustrious women were those sanctioned and authorised by the received literary canon.¹⁰⁶

Boccaccio condemns all his women readers, except his lover, to obscurity. They are offered no hope of redemption or recognition. Instead they are absent, dismissed and written out of his work. The final passages of the book, which compare his work to Petrarch's, turn to address the real audience of his book and position his text firmly within the scholarly humanist tradition.

One other element of Boccaccio's preface to his readers is worthy of notice. Although he is reluctant to place pagan and
Christian women side by side, he is quite content to include examples of women who exemplify evil (are avaricious, jealous and promiscuous) alongside women who represent virtue (are chaste, pious and self-sacrificing):

Nor do I want the reader to think it out of place if together with Penelope, Lucretia, and Sulpicia, who were very chaste matrons, they find Medea, Flora, and Sempronia, who happened to have strong but destructive characters. (p. xxxvii)

To me this indicates that Boccaccio's decision to exclude Christian women from his story does not result from the perceived moral inappropriateness of placing pagan and Christian women together, but from a specifically masculine textual concern. To include Christian women amongst his tales would necessitate, as Boccaccio himself concedes, numerous accounts of 'their virginity, purity, saintliness, and invincible firmness in overcoming carnal desire' (xxxix). Whilst such women are to be admired they do not provide the juicy tales of sexual promiscuity in which Boccaccio so delights.

By permitting the grouping together of 'good' and 'evil' women,
but not Christian and pagan women, Boccaccio belies his earlier moral distinction between women of Christian and non-Christian belief, the stated reason for his exclusion of Christian women, and also implies that the bifurcation between good and evil in women's characters is significantly less polarised than the moral framework of their different religious persuasions should make them. Boccaccio's only category of exclusion from his book turns out to be the category of Christianity because this would force him to impose a consistent and responsible moral paradigm over his work and would prevent his revelry in the explicit sexual practices of his exemplars. He is therefore prepared to risk offending the sensibilities of his virtuous female readers in order to offer sexual sensationalism for his primary audience: men. This textual strategy calls into doubt the whole purpose of his book. On closer reading the didactic aims of the text are subsumed, if not rendered meaningless, by Boccaccio's desire to amuse and titillate his male audience.

By evoking Reason, Rectitude and Justice to preside over her history of women, Christine immediately declares her work to
have far more serious aims. In her opening speech Dame Reason addresses "Christine":

...in fact we have come to vanquish from the world the same error into which you had fallen, so that from now on ladies and all valiant women may have a refuge and defence against the various assailants. (p. 10)

The intention to disempower all anti-feminist attacks on women lends Christine's work an ongoing and contemporary relevance absent from Boccaccio's history. Christine does not write simply to entertain but to persuade. As we have seen she does not advocate a formal education or attempt to educate women by example. However, there is a case, I believe, for viewing La Cité des Dames itself as Christine's education for women. Not an education in the sense of teaching by instruction or example; but embedded in the text lies a lesson in re-reading anti-feminist constructions of women. It is not overtly articulated, but implicit in her textual manipulation of the stories of De Claris Mulieribus and the contemporary relevance which she encodes within her revisions, although it should be remembered that she does not encourage any change in the
social and political position of women.

Christine's textual ambitions distinguish her history from that of Boccaccio's. On only a few occasions does he extrapolate a present day relevance for his stories. When he does so his morals are inevitably concerned with negative aspects of women's characters. These can be corrected only by adopting his advice and imitating the example of his 'virtuous' exemplars like Lucretia, Camilla and Leaena. Christine, on the other hand, takes every opportunity to demonstrate the positive morals to be learnt from her tales. The story of Ceres, found in both Boccaccio and Christine, provides a good example of the difference of emphasis and purpose of the two writers. Both authors acknowledge the achievements of Ceres, but whereas Boccaccio describes the act of civilising her people as of ambivalent value, Christine displays no such doubts:

She transformed the minds of vagabonds and lazy men by drawing them to herself and leading them from the caverns of ignorance to the heights of contemplation and proper behaviour. (p. 79)

In marked contrast to her portrayal of this figure in the Othea,
Christine makes mention of Ceres on no less than five occasions and accords her great status in the City. Similarly, when talking of Minerva, whom she portrays as another profoundly influential and knowledgeable woman, Christine omits the subtle maligning of her achievements present in Boccaccio's text and uses her, like Ceres, as an example of women's capabilities:

Would men who live on bread, or who live civilly in cities following the order of the law, or who cultivate the fields have any good reason to slander and rebuff women so much, as many do, if they only thought of all the benefits? Certainly not, because thanks to women, that is, Minerva, Ceres, and Isis, so many beneficial things have come to men... (p. 81)

In making statements such as these, Christine reveals her intentions to revise and correct the stories found in Boccaccio to fulfil her own needs. The following discussion of Christine's work is designed not merely to demonstrate that Christine rewrites these tales to provide a defence of women, but to indicate the textual strategies she uses to achieve this aim, and particularly, the way in which she manipulates Boccaccio's text and his authority as a male author to this end.
Christine and Boccaccio

I deliberately wish to avoid characterising Christine's text as secondary and dependent upon Boccaccio's work. Although she uses many of the same histories of women found in Boccaccio (approximately two thirds of the stories Christine uses are contained in Boccaccio's text), she cannot be seen as heavily indebted to him in terms of content. Most of these women were well-known and mentioned in numerous classical myths and stories. To point to her choice of similar stories as an example of her textual reliance on *De Claris Mulieribus* is to misunderstand where Christine's real use of Boccaccio lies. By sharing so many of the same figures, and by consistently referring to Boccaccio's book and his name, Christine successfully associates herself with this humanist author. She uses him as a foundation from which to launch her own departure from the male literary tradition, her 'feminisation' of history as Phillippy calls it. What is more, she inverts this association so that Boccaccio's text is subsumed into her own project.
On several occasions Christine uses Boccaccio's name to add credibility to the story she is about to narrate and then proceeds to tell it with a completely different emphasis. In her story of Sappho, although she does not directly contradict Boccaccio, she misquotes him extensively and embellishes his version of the tale, placing a greater emphasis on Sappho's skills and achievements than Boccaccio himself. Whereas Boccaccio says of Sappho: 'with diligent study she ascended the steep slopes of Parnassus' (99), Christine quotes him as stating: 'Sappho, possessed of sharp wit and burning desire for constant study in the midst of bestial and ignorant men, frequented the heights of Parnassus, that is, of perfect study' (67). She then extrapolates from Boccaccio's reference to Sappho's learning, adding that she dwelt in the forests 'where Grammar, Logic, noble Rhetoric, Geometry, and Arithmetic live', implying that Sappho was acquainted with all these fields of study. This is again presented as a quotation from Boccaccio and is an intentional misreading of her source. Boccaccio does not refer to any other talents, except Sappho's skill in poetry and prose. Almost certainly, he would not have attributed a woman with great powers of rhetoric so casually. Even a progressive
humanist educator, such as Leonard Bruni, states quite firmly that rhetoric is not a skill appropriate for women.¹⁰⁷

There are other fundamental differences between the two histories which reveal Christine's authorial motives and her revision of the patriarchal myths of the De Claris Mulieribus. These disparities can be divided loosely into structural differences in format, both within the individual treatment of the stories and in the overall structure of the books, and into differences in content.

One major reason for the variations in content results from Christine's ideological commitment to a Christian paradigm of behaviour/morality. She explicitly rejects Boccaccio's criteria for selection, which fail to differentiate adequately between Christian constructions of what is moral and what immoral. She adopts the traditional dichotomy of good and evil as the sole determinant for women's entrance to the City. As a Christian and a moralist Christine is anxious to retain a Christian perspective even though she includes stories of pagan women and goddesses whom she admires.
It can be argued that she provides her Christian viragos with special status within the City. She devotes a separate section to stories of saints and martyrs and at the end of the book the Virgin Mary is chosen by Dame Justice to 'rule and govern the City', thus enacting an implicit hierarchy of Christian over pagan. It is important, nevertheless, that these Christian women are expected to inherit a city founded essentially on secular virtues of Reason, Rectitude and Justice. Her inclusion of secular and Christian figures of authority in this manner can be seen as, 'affirming the connection between pagan and Christian virtues which her feminine city...seeks to establish.'\textsuperscript{108} Without this link the histories would have no relevance or application to contemporary readers.

Other changes to the structure of Boccaccio's history reflect Christine's desire to reach and appeal to women of her own generation. As well as a whole section devoted to the achievements of Christian women, Christine attempts to make her work more interesting and applicable to her readers by incorporating figures from the present. She adds a specifically
local element to her book by mentioning several of France's queens and princesses, such as Fredegund, Blanche and Jeanne, all of whom ruled the country at some stage of their lives.\textsuperscript{109} Christine's motives for including such groups of women are, of course, far from pure. Her profuse praise of her patrons, the Duchess of Burgundy, the Duchess of Berry and Queen Isabella of Bavaria is no doubt one of the reasons Delany calls her 'a pompous, reactionary sycophant.'\textsuperscript{110} These accusations are well founded but they disguise the textual (rather than political) reason for the inclusion. By adding stories of virtuous women from her own era, Christine refutes Boccaccio's declaration that they are too few and insignificant to mention. Her celebration of these contemporary women implicitly criticises Boccaccio's categories for inclusion. Boccaccio deliberately isolates the exceptional women of his histories in the distant past. They are kept at a distance from the reader's contemporary context so as not to become too threatening to his male readers or perhaps too inspirational to his women readers? Christine's open-ended invitation to ladies of all classes from the past present and future to seek refuge in her City traverses the textual and historical distance between
these women. She repairs the rupture in the historical continuity between women of antiquity and the present day, created by Boccaccio and gives her text a contemporary relevance absent from Boccaccio's.

Christine's moral criteria of selection also involves the omission of certain figures from women's traditional history. Most of these women she excludes are predictable. The tale of Venus, who Boccaccio claims to incorporate more because of her 'excellent beauty', than because she is worthy of praise, is understandably absent from Christine's book. She has no desire to promote or admire such examples of sexual love outside the bonds of matrimony. Clytaemnestra, Olympus and Cleopatra are thus excluded because of their adultery; Flora, because she is a prostitute; Rhea Ilia because she became pregnant whilst a vestal nun; Pope Joan, because she too breaks her vows of celibacy and so on.

Christine makes no attempt to recuperate these women from their carnal sins, probably because most were too well known to omit the sexual exploits for which they were remembered,
but also because Christine's self righteous morality is happy to expel them from her City. It is should be added that Christine does offer reprieve to those women whom Boccaccio has attributed with sexual promiscuity without any basis. Christine moderates or removes all mention of sex from the tales of Medea, Deianira, Helen of Troy, Circe and many others.\footnote{111} Eve is the most remarkable exclusion from Christine's City, particularly as she is the first woman discussed in Boccaccio's collection. Paradoxically, Christine omits the only Judeo-Christian woman that he mentions because she is not eligible to enter the City, being traditionally the first person/woman to bring sin into the world. I believe her exclusion is far more problematic for Christine than this initial explanation suggests, and I will return to a more detailed analysis of Eve's absence.

One other structural technique is worthy of notice because it enables Christine to promote her most important exemplars, both Christian and Pagan, in a more distinctive and favourable light. She re-orders her material within the text to eliminate the anti-feminist elements Boccaccio introduces and to keep the reader more focused on the achievements of these women.
Her organisation of the histories is far more purposeful than Boccaccio's. They are grouped together carefully as Groag Bell notes, 'so as to drive home specific talents, capabilities, and virtues exhibited by these models.' ¹¹² Rather than retaining each story as a separate and distinctive entity as Boccaccio does, Christine opens up her narrative so that stories can lead into one another, develop points from other tales and allow women famous for several achievements to appear throughout the book at places appropriate for each skill.

Her style is less indebted to the more strict classical rules of composition and shows greater flexibility, a result, perhaps of her necessary isolation from this part of the literary tradition. Not all characters are accorded the privilege of her split narrative. Only two types of women appear more than once in La Cité des Dames, those whom Christine holds in particular esteem, like Minerva, Carmentis and Circe, and those whose histories require special and selective treatment such as Medea and Dido. In the cases of the latter women, Christine separates their skills and achievements from the tragic love affairs for
which they became best known, preventing the aspects Christine wishes to stress from being subsumed in the more popular story. Christine's accounts of both women constitute a substantial revision of the stories as found in *De Claris Mulieribus*.

Medea is first mentioned because of her knowledge of the sciences and her skill in magic: 'In learning...she surpassed and exceeded all women; she knew the powers of every herb and all the potions which could be concocted, and she was ignorant of no art which can be known' (69). Such praise contrasts strongly with Boccaccio's estimation of Medea as 'the best trained woman in evil doing' (35). Just as radical a disparity is to be seen in the differing versions of Medea's love for Jason. Boccaccio narrates how Medea deliberately causes a civil uprising against her father in order to help Jason win the fleece and thereby secure his love. She is then accused of murdering and dismembering her young brother, Aetes, using her magic to help Jason acquire his father's kingdom and other crimes threatening to patriarchal authority and power. Finally, Boccaccio blames all these events on Médea's 'shamelessness'.
which enabled her to satisfy her carnal lust for Jason at any cost. (p. 37)

Christine's separate account under the sympathetic title, 'Medea in love', completely revises the myth. In this version Medea is pictured as the innocent victim of Jason's deceit and self-interest. Her only crime is that of excessive love that made her believe Jason's promises of marriage and devotion and persuaded her to teach him how to win the fleece. Jason, however, lies and deserts Medea for another woman, thus destroying her: "For this reason, Medea,. turned despondent, nor did her heart ever again fell goodness or joy' (190).

Dido is offered the same defence of her love for Aeneas. Christine's story which diverges considerably from Boccaccio's account, is more in keeping with the version of the story in Vergil's Aeneid, although she is obviously also aware of Dante's version of the story because she is careful to salvage Dido from Dante's placement of her amongst the 'lustful' in the Inferno. Dido becomes once more the quarry of a heartless lover who abandons her 'secretly and treacherously' (p.189), leaving her to
take her own life out of grief.\textsuperscript{113}

It is however the 'studious women' with whom I believe Christine most fully identifies and it is to these that she devotes special attention. It is also in these stories that Christine most exploits her self-created association with Boccaccio. As the figures of Minerva and Circe have already been discussed, let us look instead at the example of Carmentis. In this part of the history a traditional myth narrated by Boccaccio is re-read by Christine in order to overturn the exclusively male origins of culture.

Amongst all her other achievements Carmentis' role as the inventor of the Latin language is the aspect of Boccaccio's story upon which Christine seizes. She talks of it three times. This is not surprising, given the significance accorded to Latin in her present day. Latin was, as we have seen, the traditional language used in the exclusively male genres of ecclesiastical histories, political treatises and, more recently, had become the hallmark of humanist scholarship. Christine states that using this script 'practically an endless number of books and
volumes have been written and composed, where the deeds of man and the noble and excellent glories of God, as well as the sciences and arts, have been placed and held in perpetual memory.' (p. 78)

To be able to claim Latin was invented by a woman, a story validated by its presence in Boccaccio's text, is a point Christine, as a woman writer, cannot afford to underplay. It turns the whole of the patriarchal literary tradition on its head, by establishing a woman as the founder of classical literature. It gives Christine the evidence to support her defence of women's capabilities and the courage to declare:

Henceforth, let all writers be silent who speak badly of women... those who have attacked women and who still attack them, in their books and poems, and all their accomplices and supporters too - let them lower their eyes, ashamed for having dared speak so badly, in view of the truth which runs counter to their poems; this noble lady, Carmentis, through the profundity of her understanding taught them like a school-mistress...- the lesson thanks to which they consider themselves so lofty and honoured, that is, she taught them the Latin
The most learned male writers are subjected to the authority of a woman. Through the example of Carmentis, Christine dismantles the masculinist monopoly of power, made possible through control of textual production.

The claim that a woman gave Latin to men offers such a threat to the whole western tradition of literature that it requires strong verification from a reliable male authority. This is precisely the function Boccaccio's name fulfils in Christine's text: 'And let no one say that I am telling you these things just to be pleasant: they are Boccaccio's own words, and his credibility is well known and evident' (78). There is a note of bitterness present as well in this story. Christine condemns her own exclusion from so much literature which the denial of a Latin education has caused her because of her sex. It is no wonder that she cannot resist adding rather pointedly: '...thanks to her [Carmentis] men have been brought out of ignorance and led to knowledge, even if they do not recognise it' (78).

Christine manipulates Boccaccio's name to authorise other
examples of studious women, such as Cornificia and Proba. The popularisation of the story of Cornificia, because of its statements on women's learning abilities, has obscured the textual strategies which underlie Christine's narration. Christine declares that Cornificia 'surpassed her brother' in learning, whereas Boccaccio only allows her to be 'equal in glory to her brother'. Her willingness to go beyond Boccaccio's text in this sort of way can be seen in dozens of examples. Her declaration of women's potential superiority in learning is important because she rewrites Boccaccio within her narrative to support her more ambitious claims about women's abilities. As Groag Bell observes: 'She quoted him not merely to give him his due as an author, but because as a male advocate he would carry more weight in an area that she knew to be unpopular.'

In the *De Claris Mulieribus*, Boccaccio begins his praise of Cornificia in a typically negative fashion, elevating her by slandering other women: 'Let slothful women be ashamed, and those who wretchedly have no confidence in themselves...' (188) These women are to be condemned because they restrict themselves to domestic roles despite the fact that 'they have in
common with men the ability to do those things which make men famous..." (188) This backhanded acknowledgement of women's theoretical equality with men is quickly undercut. According to Boccaccio, Cornificia became famous because 'with genius and labour she rose above her sex', implying that although women might have the hidden potential to equal men they must reject all aspects of 'femininity' and become like a man to do so. Thus the equality of women is destroyed before it has been properly created. Christine re-interprets his story of Cornificia to make far stronger claims about women's ability to learn. She reinforces her own arguments by quoting Boccaccio's supposed verification of them at the beginning and end of her account: 'As further proof of what I am telling you, Boccaccio also talks about the attitude of women who despise themselves and their own minds' and also: '...you can see how this author Boccaccio testifies to what I have told you and how he praises and approves of learning in women' (65). Such revisions of Boccaccio are further legitimised by attributing them to Dame Reason, allowing Christine to make these statements with impunity. Such contentious comments about women's learning are consistently reinforced and stamped with textual authority.
through this clever manipulation of Boccaccio's revered position within the dominant literary circles.

Through this presentation of women's role in literature and scholarly prowess it is plain that Christine is attempting to incorporate humanist debate on the moral and intellectual appropriateness of women's learning (although again it must be stressed that she in no way advocates a full education for women). She is also anxious to once more attack and debunk the traditional medieval accusations about women which she confronted in the *Querelle de la Rose*. Despite the fact that her position within this debate is, in my opinion, that of a moralist rather than a feminist, her condemnation of de Meun's moral impropriety is accompanied by her rejection of his low opinion of women.¹¹⁶ Many of the historical figures she chooses to defend women's moral strength come from Boccaccio's history but nearly all are dramatically reconstructed to conform to Christine's own requirements. Such variations as are found in Christine's version of the histories of Sempronia, Leontium and Lucretia mark Christine's willingness to diverge from Boccaccio's text and tell the stories from a woman's
perspective.

This rewriting of traditional myths, used continually to signify authorised, and inevitably masculinist, values enables Christine to preserve the stories of classical women. By fundamentally altering the context of the myths and their didactic intentions, Christine dramatically rehabilitates some of the most entrenched textual archetypes of the woman/monster. The story of Semponia includes a decisive moral; that a woman of great beauty, intelligence and grace can remain 'full of gentleness and sweetness' (86). In Boccaccio these charms take on a more sinister tone: 'she could arouse wantonness and shamelessness if she so desired' (174). Boccaccio goes even further, claiming Semponia 'burned with lust [and]...discarded all womanly honour' (174). In Boccaccio's tale, Semponia is the archetype of wanton female desire depicted in Genesis. For Christine to ignore this substantial aspect of Boccaccio's version and impose a positive and moral reading of Semponia shows the extent of her narrative autonomy. Her rewriting of the story of Medea to omit her infamous slaughter of her own children again reveals her divergence and retrieval of another
anti-feminist myth.

The establishment of her own voice within the narrative is nowhere more evident than in the story of Leontium. Her vigorous defence of this woman must, I believe be partially attributable to the disparaging comparison which Jean de Montreuill makes between Christine and this woman in the *Querelle de la Rose*. Her complete contradiction of the view that Leontium 'dared to write against and criticise Theophrastus, a famous philosopher of that period, moved by either envy or womanly temerity' defiantly corrects Boccaccio's story:

Leontium was a Greek woman, and also such a great philosopher that she dared, for impartial and serious reasons, to correct and attack the philosopher Theophrastus. (p. 68)

It also prepares the reader for her further attacks on Theophrastus later in the *La Cité des Dames*. Phillippy understands Christine's account of Leontium as one of the most important stories in *La Cité des Dames* because it is most clearly 'a striking departure from Boccaccio's authority in order to establish her own.'

118
Christine's relationship to Boccaccio must be viewed in far more revisionist terms than most critical renderings of this relationship have previously allowed. She dramatically restructures the order of his history, imposing a mode of selection and omission which not only distinguishes her text from his but offers a critique of the underlying assumptions behind his choice and presentation of the stories. Her use of the vernacular and her incorporation of contemporary and Christian women make her version of these histories specifically oriented toward a female readership and highlight the inconsistencies of Boccaccio's stated narratological intentions. The dramatically differing content of her accounts which eliminate anti-feminist implications about women's abilities and promote a far more positive and enabling conception of women again shows the extent to which Christine is prepared to rewrite and manipulate her source.

**Christine and the Anxiety of Authorship**

Her radical appropriation of Boccaccio's text and her wilful manipulation of his name and authority are in some ways
reminiscent of the forms of misreading or 'misprision' that Harold Bloom discusses in his account of a writer's relation to his literary precursors. His theory of poetic anxiety and deliberate misreading of one's precursors provides one formulation of textual influence that might prove at least partially successful in illuminating Christine's relationship to Boccaccio.

Bloom's theory, first formulated in 1973 in The Anxiety of Influence advances a Freudian theory of poetic history based on the Oedipal struggle between father and son. Literary history is constructed as a history of influence in which a 'strong' writer (Bloom refers specifically to poets but his work has been generally accepted to be applicable to writers of prose as well) is driven by an anxiety of influence, a fear that 'he' is not his 'own' creator and that his writing will be subsumed by the powerful presence of his literary precursors. To borrow A. C. Spearing's summary:

The literary son feels that his authority is lessened by the imaginative area already occupied by the literary father, and he must, if he is himself a 'strong poet' or
'major aesthetic consciousness,' adopt one or more of a variety of modes of misreading in order to gain for himself the already occupied space.  

The new writer must struggle with his literary forefathers and transcend them in order to become an author in his own right. His deliberate misreading or misinterpretation is really a complex defence mechanism that allows him to invalidate, or emasculate his precursors.

Bloom's theory of misprision is too dependent on constructions of modernity to be freely applied to the work of a fifteenth century writer. The Freudian psycho-analytic aspect of Bloom's work is particularly unsuitable for direct transposition to the medieval period. In my own act of misprision I have therefore separated the materialist implications of Bloom's work from the psycho-analytic theories of self. Once distanced from modern constructions of self, Bloom's theory can be used to provide insight into the complex relationship between the new author and auctor in the late medieval literary theory.

The theory of poetic anxiety (and Spearing's re-articulation of
it) is intensely male in its formulation of literary history and is wholly inadequate as a model for women's writing. In order to liberate it from its exclusively masculine, Oedipal perspective and enable it to provide a model for women's experience, Bloom's theory itself requires strong misprision. Just as there is no symmetry between the psychosexual development of boys and girls, so Bloom's model cannot be simply inverted to apply to women writers. Its application for women writers has already been partially recuperated by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their influential work on women's fiction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

Gilbert and Gubar state that women writers experience a more primary sense of anxiety than men because they feel alienated from and anomalous in the male literary tradition and find it hard to write within the boundaries of male constructed literary genres. They state that it is only with the rise of the novel in the mid-eighteenth century, and the gradual acceptance of other traditionally 'lower' forms of literature such as diaries, novellas and letters that women began to write more conspicuously.
For women, literary precursors are highly ambiguous because they are usually the same male figures of authority who attempt to silence and constrain women by offering them in their works only very limited roles of 'silent angel' or 'unnatural monster.' As a result Gilbert and Gubar believe women writers suffer from an even more primary anxiety than their male counterparts, an anxiety of authorship, 'a radical fear that she cannot create'. To overcome this literary paralysis she must first combat her socialisation which makes conflict with her precursors seem futile, ridiculous and self-destructive and overcome the belief that she cannot ever become a precursor herself or participate fully in the literary tradition. Often the only way she can begin to redefine the conditions of her socialisation is to find a model, a female precursor who can act as proof that such defiance of patriarchal authority and the literary tradition is achievable. Unlike male writers who seek to destroy, women writers seek to identify with and gain support from their literary foremothers.

This model can also be applied to Gilbert and Gubar's own work. One of the aims of American-based feminist literary criticism
since the nineteen seventies has been to provide contemporary women with literary antecedents who can serve as inspirational models by recovering women writers of the past. Much of the work done on Christine has been a result of this feminist historicist project.

Many of the models offered by feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar run into considerable difficulties when they confront medieval writers because of their historical specificity for women of the eighteenth-, and nineteenth- centuries. The search for literary foremothers, for example, is never mentioned in Christine's work because of the almost total lack of women's writing available. Even the courtly love poems and romances written by women were generally accessible only via the performances of male jongleurs who controlled the transmission of these largely oral forms of literature.\textsuperscript{125}

The work of Gilbert and Gubar on women's literary anxiety cannot, therefore, be neatly applied to Christine. However, their related examination of Milton's representation of Eve and its cultural dominance can provide a very interesting perspective
on Christine's literary anxiety about the Christian fore-mother of women: Eve. Since Gilbert and Gubar draw heavily on a Bloomian reading of the relationship of women writers to this figure and to her modern creator, Milton, it is worth pursuing this 'swerving' of Bloom's model a little further.

The figure of Eve as the progenitor of the female sex is problematic for all Christian (and non-Christian) women. For Christine the only solution is omission; a denial of this archetypal image of woman as 'Satanic Temptress.' Later women writers have confronted 'Eve' more openly, transforming her into a Promethean figure of rebellion, or as Gilbert and Gubar observe, the 'Byronian hero' of radical Romanticism. Yet, Milton's depiction which draws heavily on medieval constructions of 'Adam's companion' with which Christine was doubtless familiar, has continued to intimidate women, and in 'blocked the view of possibilities both real and literary.'

Bloom, in his model of poetic anxiety, recognises the potency of Milton's construction of Eve in *Paradise Lost* and proclaims it to be an significant stumbling block for women writers. The
myth which Milton proffers through Eve is the archetypal story of Woman's otherness. It establishes her secondary status and her resulting moral weakness which leads her to become secretly dissatisfied with her place and thus susceptible to the serpent's wiles. Like Satan, she is seen as obsessed with equality and power. After her 'fall' she ponders whether she should keep the fruit for herself: 'so to add what wants/ In Female Sex, the more to draw [Adam's] Love,/ And render me more equal.' (P.L. 9. 821-823) Her otherness draws her to anger, sin and her expulsion from the garden of God which is also, as Gilbert and Gubar note, the garden of poetry.

This creation of Eve is so culturally pervasive and debilitating that Bloom exclaims that Milton is for women writers 'the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles.' Although Bloom refers specifically to Milton's construction of Eve, the similarity to the medieval notion of Eve is strong enough to assume that Christine experienced the story of Eve with parallel feelings of confusion, exclusion and anxiety. She is unable to confront this powerful portrayal of Woman and rewrite her, as she does with the strong but
ambiguous figure of Medea. Yet she refuses simply to restate this misogynistic paradigm of Woman. She therefore chooses to leave Eve absent from her text.

Christine thus challenges the traditional version of women's history through omission as well as reconstruction. Just as Christine's revision of many of the traditional figures of women's history, Minerva, Dido, and Sempronia, subverts the sanctioned representation of women so, too, her suppression of the irredeemable figures of Eve and to a large extent, Medea amounts to a radical recasting of patriarchy's founding myths of women - some of which, like the story of Medea, are almost as culturally pervasive as the story of Eve.

The threat such a text posed to Christine's contemporaries, despite its obvious political conservatism, is evident from its swift disappearance from circulation comparatively soon after it was written. It is unusual for a work dedicated to royalty and written by the court poet to have such a short-lived circulation. Yet, it certainly went out of circulation much faster than the Othea. Although La Cité des Dames was presented to the Queen
of France, the Duke of Burgundy and other royal patrons the original French text was never edited and made available in print. The English translation made in 1521 was also left untouched until 1982 when Richards' translation was published.

In her essay on the repressive nature of textual transmission in the medieval period, especially for women writers, Susan Schibanoff observes that Christine is already written out of Henry Pepwell's English translation in 1521. His introduction to the edition makes no mention of Christine as the author, referring only to its translator, the Earl of Kent. He explains that because Bryon Anslay was 'ever diligent/Of ladies (abroad) to speak their royal fame', he requested the publisher to 'print it in his name.'\textsuperscript{129} Pepwell's decision to delete Christine's name doubtless stemmed from the belief that such a text was less provocative if written by a man. It was far more common and acceptable for men to debate women's abilities, as the almost entirely male authorship in the \textit{Querelle des Femmes} in the fifteenth-, and sixteenth- centuries testifies. Even so, there is a suggestion that Pepwell further delayed publication because of social and economic hesitation. He claims to have postponed
printing, because although he approved of its positive view of 
women he was afraid that others would not: 'it is the guise of 
people lewd their [women's] prowess to despise.'

Pepwell appears to feel that it will not be a good seller and because of 
the competition between publishing houses in this period he 
may have deliberately put its publication aside for a while.

Other texts by Christine have suffered a similar fate. The *Othea*
remained popular but was quickly separated from its female 
authorship. When it was printed by Philippe Pigouchet in Paris 
in the late fifteenth-century its title was changed and 
Christine's name omitted. In its English translation Stephen 
Scrope assures the readers that it was written by 'famous 
doctors' of the university of Paris whom Christine 
commissioned. *Le Livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie* is 
dealt with in a similar manner. Schibanoff describes how one 
group of manuscripts and early printed editions by Philippe and 
Vérard Le Noir removed her name and substituted masculine 
modifiers to the word 'aucteur'. The passage in which Christine 
justifies her writing on the subject of war by citing the female 
war goddess, Minerva, as her precedent, is naturally absent as
Les Trois Vertus is one of the few of Christine's texts to survive this suppression. Its contemporary popularity, manifested in the more than fifty manuscripts that have come down to us, appear to have ensured Christine's retention of its authorship. Even so, the last French edition was printed in 1536 and we are still awaiting a modern French edition to the text.¹³¹

Despite the growing interest in Christine, it can be seen that much work remains to be done. It is vital that Christine's other works become available for the same scrutiny as La Cité des Dames. Feminist literary historians need to ensure that Christine is never again lost to the vagaries of history. However, it must also ensure that Christine is not misrepresented in the effort to retrieve her writing and restore her to our view of the literary past.
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Title: Medieval textual production and the politics of women's writing: case studies of two medieval women writers and their critical reception

Date: 1991-07


Publication Status: Unpublished

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/39453

File Description: p.184-292

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