

Changing the Story: Christine's Construction of Difference

Although much work has been done on Christine de Pizan, especially since the 1980's, one area of her output that has not been greatly commented on is her use of fiction and fictive figures to do the work of philosophy. This is not surprising, as it is only recently that Christine has really begun to be noticed as a philosophical writer.¹ Given the three mediums she most often wrote in—allegorical visions, political treatises, and poetry—it is equally unsurprising that her non-traditional interactions with philosophy have remained largely out of focus, while other concerns, such as her work on gender and her political and poetic accomplishments, have taken center stage. Yet, even in the fields of gender relations, political theorizing, and poetic creation, Christine shows her ability as a philosophical thinker; indeed, as I will show, as a philosopher proper. She does so primarily as a storyteller, through the guise of fiction.

In this book, I use the term “fiction” when speaking of work Christine does in her various visions and fabulous tales: her stories, her

¹In her seminal two-volume work on the concept of woman as it developed through history, Sister Prudence Allen observes that while Christine is becoming “well known to scholars of literature,” she has remained “relatively unknown to philosophers.” She seeks to remedy this by devoting an entire chapter to Christine’s work, arguing that “Christine de Pizan is the first woman author who demonstrated a consistent ability to engage in philosophical argumentation.” See Sister Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman* vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 539.

building of fictional cities and dream-journeys throughout the world, as well as her creation and use of personas and figures like Ladies Reason, Rectitude, Justice, Fortune, Nature, Libera, Opinion, Philosophy, and many others. Of course, “fiction” is a term recognizable to modern audiences now, and Christine does not tend to speak of “fiction” as such. Rather, she usually prefers to talk about “*dire de parole couverte*”—speaking by means of veiled speech—that is, speaking by *integumenta*, “under the cover” of stories or fictions, as we will discuss shortly. Much of Christine’s philosophical writing takes place in her fictionalized visions in the form of narrated dialogues. Those narrations do not comprise the whole or even the majority of her work.² Nevertheless, narration and fictionalized dialogues that take place in dreams or visions remain an important and central part of her oeuvre. When necessary, I will refer to her later and more openly political works, but for the majority of this book I will focus my attention on her narrative texts: specifically, the *Path of Long Study*, the *Mutation of Fortune*, the *Book of the City of Ladies*, and the *Vision*. These are not her only narrative works (her *Letter of Othea to Hector* is another important narrative text that enjoyed a good deal of popularity, and there were others as well), but they are the four on which I have chosen to focus because they are the allegorical works to which we still have access in which she most keenly develops her philosophical concepts.

A brief word on the topic of medieval allegory and the practice of *allegoresis* is in order, however, before I proceed. The term “allegory” is notoriously difficult to precisely define, but Christine is typically understood to be working and writing allegorically in her primarily narrative works, such as I deal with here.³ The focus of this book’s work with Christine is not on the structure of allegory as such, however, but on her use of allegorical *reading*: the practice of *allegoresis*. Thus, I will be concerned primarily with the hermeneutical movements she undertakes in order to produce new meanings from old stories—as well as making

²She undertakes a good deal of non-narrative treatises as well; see for example her *Book of the Body Politic* and *Book of Peace*, both of which I will occasionally draw from in this work.

³I am speaking in particular of those four works of Christine’s that I address most often in this book. It is also worth noting that Christine herself uses the term “allegorie” in her *Epistre Othea* as part of her tripartite division of the work: *texte*, *glose*, and *allegorie* for each of the one hundred vignettes she presents as part of that work.

stories of her own that can also be read allegorically, and as authoritative points from which to start when thinking about a particular topic under discussion.⁴

Additionally, Christine's use of fictionalized narrative is not self-explanatory. It is legitimate to ask, why use something that is fictionalized to make a philosophical point? As we will see, Christine is motivated by three circumstances, two of which are matters of social expectation and the third of which is philosophical intention. First, as a woman writing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Europe, Christine lacked the cultural authority to speak as a philosopher. Never having attended any university or received any formal position as a student of some master, she did not possess the necessary legitimation to be recognized as one who could or should speak on philosophical matters. Second, and likely as a result of the first expectation, Christine initially built her reputation as a poet. From her position as poet, she was able to use the properly poetic justification of speaking truths—even philosophical ones—under the cover of fiction. Writing as a poet under cover, *sub integumento* was a recognized means of conveying truth, and was therefore one avenue nominally open to her if she could prove her poetic ability and philosophical understanding.⁵ More importantly and finally, stories and fictionalizations themselves have literary advantages attractive to a writer like Christine. Guiding the audience through the text, she is not only able to outline convincing arguments through narrative means but, more importantly, can bring her audience to respond affectively. As any good rhetorician would, she wants to engage her reader's emotions, in order convince them to change the way they act.

To set the context properly for how these expectations shaped her intentions and work, I will look in this Chap. 1 at Christine's struggle with her own context, and the fictionalized means she used to resist the misogynistic understandings of women so prevalent in the literary tradition of her time. Using many of the intellectual tools that were available to scholars in her century, she will show her reader a different way to read and a different way to construct textual meaning. She will redefine

⁴A good place to start if one is looking for a more thorough discussion of the practice of allegory itself is Suzanne Conklin Akbari's book *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (University of Toronto Press, 2004).

⁵I will cover Christine's use of *integumenta* extensively when I discuss her use of the figure of Semiramis later.

the concept of woman through skillful revision of stories from previous authoritative sources.

First, however, some background on our medieval protagonist. Christine de Pizan was an Italian-born woman who lived and wrote in France in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. By her own account, she showed a marked preference for study even early in life, though her mother was against it.⁶ Christine was married in 1380, at the age of fifteen, to Etienne de Castel, a man her father had chosen who seemed a good match.⁷ They had three children, only two of which made it to adulthood. Of her marriage, Christine always spoke positively and lovingly, calling herself “lucky” and likening her husband to a capable captain of a ship, as we will see below. For ten happy years, she enjoyed her love and family, but the death in 1380 of the king Christine’s father had served—Charles V—had already set in motion a tragic chain of events influencing the Pizan-Castel household, as well indeed all of France. Christine’s marital bliss would regrettably be short lived.

Though it was nearly a decade before Christine says “Lady Fortune” turned against her and her family, when it happened the change was swift and devastating. In 1387 or 1388, Christine’s father died, leaving behind little for the family to support itself. Shortly after her father’s death, Christine’s own husband fell ill while on a mission with King Charles VI in 1390, and also died. The monarchy and France itself was in little less trouble, for it was right around that time when that same king, Charles VI, suddenly began having marked fits of insanity. His mental illness and consequent inability to rule plunged the land of France into chaos.⁸ The

⁶For Christine’s account of her mother’s reaction, see Christine de Pizan, *The Livre de la Cité des Dames* by *Christine de Pizan: A Critical Edition* ed. and trans. Maureen C. Curnow, 2 vols., Ph.D. thesis (Vanderbilt University, 1975), 875; *City*, 154–155.

⁷See Christine de Pizan, *The Vision of Christine de Pizan*, trans. Glenda McLeod and Charity Cannon Willard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005), 93.

⁸Charity Cannon Willard describes the onset of the King’s fits in her detailed biography of Christine: see Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works* (New York: Persea, 1984), 41. Nadia Margolis deals with this as well in her *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan* (University Press of Florida, 2011), 9. See page 20–23 for her description of the strife between the King’s relatives leading to the assassination of Louis of Orléans and eventually civil war.

kingdom was thus drawn ever more surely into civil war and renewed war with England, as the King's brother and uncles fought for control.

Adding to Christine's particular troubles, her husband's illness had moved so quickly that he died without having the chance to let her know the state of their own financial affairs, including the various sources of their revenue. Christine bitterly lamented this lack of knowledge, as in addition to her grief at the loss of her loved spouse, it left her and her family in a very vulnerable financial position throughout these periods of intense social chaos.⁹ Widowed at the age of twenty-five with three young children, her mother, and an unmarried niece to care for, and with few resources, Christine herself fell ill for quite some time,¹⁰ while drawn into protracted legal battles to try either to recover or defend what was left of her household's estate.¹¹ All told, it took her almost ten years to consolidate her position and take the unusual route of earning her and her family's living as a writer. This she did with vehemence, first penning love poems, then allegorical stories and debating literary works, and finally, in reaction to the growing instability of France and her patrons' demands, increasingly writing more politically oriented works.

⁹Christine tells us, "For since I was not present at the death of my said husband, who was overtaken by a sudden epidemic... in the town of Beauvais where he had gone with the King, accompanied only by some of his servants and a supplementary escort, so I could not precisely know the condition of his finances. For as it is the general custom of married men not to tell or declare all their business affairs to their wives, from which there often comes misfortune, as experience has shown me... so I well know that all he possessed did not come to light for me." French: "Car, comme je ne fusse au trespassement de mon dit mary, lequel fu surpris de hastive epidimie... en la ville de Beauvaiz ou avec le roy estoit alez et n'estoit acompaigniez fors de ses serviteurs et maignee estrange, si ne pos savoir precisement l'estat de sa chevence. Car, comme se soit la coustume commune des hommes mariez de non dire et declairer leurs affaires entierement a leurs femmes, de laquelle chose vient souvent mal, comme il m'appert par experience... si sçay bien que a clarté ne me vint tout ce qu'il avoit." de Pizan, *l'Advision, édition critique*, ed. Christine Reno and Liliane Dulac (Paris: Honore Champion, 2001), 100; *Vision*, 96.

¹⁰"So that I might arrive to the point where Fortune was leading me, at this time at the height of my misfortunes, I succumbed, like Job, to a long illness."; "Affin que je parvenisse au point ou Fortune me conduisoit en ce temps ou comble de mes adversitez fortune[es], me sourdi comme a Job longue maladie." de Pizan, *Advision*, 101; *Vision*, 97. Brackets in text.

¹¹These legal battles, by her accounts, lasted for more than fourteen years after her husband's death. She writes, "Do not think that this might have persisted for one or two, but for more than fourteen years." de Pizan, *Advision*, 102; *Vision*, 97.

The story of Christine's life as a writer always has as its backdrop, therefore, her need for patrons to pay for her work as well as the deteriorating social and political situation in which she found herself and her family.¹²

In addition to this unstable backdrop, Christine also faced the issue of social and literary misogyny. Although some of her works became quite popular, she was still faced with gender-based accusations and doubts as to her skill, for the *auctores*—the authorities—comprising the tradition were nearly all male.¹³ This meant she had to answer charges that she should not write as an *auctor*—as a cultural authority from which to begin when reflecting on a particular topic. As an allegorical writer, what better way to respond to that dilemma than by a fictionally narrated sex change? If one could in theory be either male or female and still remain the “same” human person, it would be possible to understand gender in a much less deterministic way. It is with this in mind that Christine proceeds. We will see in Sects. 2.1 and 2.2 how she first shows by fictive means that gender changes are possible, using herself as an example, after which she tackles the question of redescribing the category and capabilities of “women,” thus taking away the necessity of changing genders simply to fulfill particular roles.

2.1 CHANGING BODIES

In *The Mutation of Fortune*, written in 1403, Christine gives a metaphorical narrative of her marriage and subsequent “mutation.” She tells her readers that she had happily resided in “the court of Hymen” since

¹²Charity Cannon Willard traces both of these issues—and their relation—extensively in her biography of Christine. See Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 175. Nadia Margolis also treats it extensively in her more recent. *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan*. I will discuss the political situation in France as it impacted on Christine's work more later.

¹³Reading letters by the Col brothers with whom she debated the merits of de Meun's section of the *Roman de la Rose* provides ample indication of this. See for instance Gontier Col's note that “I sent you the day before yesterday, a first letter in which I begged, exhorted, and advised you to retract your error and manifest foolishness which was caused by your pretentiousness, as a woman passionate about this matter.”; “t'ay premierement par une mienne lettre, que avant yer t'envoyay, exortée, avisée et priée de toy corriger et amender de l'erreur et magnifeste folie ou demence trop grant a toy venue par presompcion ou outrecuidance et comme femme pacionnée en ceste matiere.” Gontier Col, “15 September 1401 Letter to Christine de Pizan” in *Debating the Roman de la Rose*, ed. Christine McWebb (New York: Routledge, 2007), 134–135.

the age of fifteen (when she married Etienne de Castel),¹⁴ but everything changed with his sudden and unexpected death. She paints a poignant picture of how her “mistress,” Jealous Fortune, wreaks havoc when she summons Christine and her husband on a perilous sea-journey. During the course of this voyage, a terrible storm strikes the ship and Etienne is swept overboard by what sounds like a tornado. All Christine’s accounts of this event are filled with grief, despair, and panic on her part. She even talks about being struck utterly incapacitated and wishing to kill herself.¹⁵

It is important to recognize the fictional elements of the narrative surrounding her husband’s real death; Christine was a very careful writer, and would not have written the account this way without rhetorical cause. The image she uses of the storm and the whirlwind in particular are instructive, and illuminate some of her intent. Although tornadoes do occur in France, they are not particularly frequent, and appear to have been even less so in the past.¹⁶ I am inclined, then, to see Christine’s imagery of this large corkscrew-shaped windstorm as a whirlwind of the Old Testament type, with which Christine was undoubtedly familiar. While the image of a whirlwind appears several times in the Bible, one notable occurrence is when Elijah is taken from Elisha (2 Kings 2:1–14). Elisha was Elijah’s protégé, and requested of him that, when Elijah was gone, he would inherit a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit and abilities,

¹⁴This is, of course, a reference by classical allusion to her marriage. Christine gives an account of this in her *Mutacion*: see in particular lines 773–1024 in which she speaks allegorically of her time at Hymen’s court. Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, vol. 1 of 4, ed. Suzanne Solente (Paris: Picard, 1959), 33–41; lines 773–1024.

¹⁵Christine writes, “At that moment, a sudden and powerful wind started up; the whirlwind was twisted like a corkscrew and it struck against the ship and hit our good master so violently that it took him very far out to sea. Then I wished to be dead!”; “Adonc un soubdain vent grant erre/ Se lieve; comme un faulsillon/ Fu tortillé l’estourbillon,/ Si se vient en la nef frapper/ Et nostre bon patron happer/ par tel rendon qu’en mer l’emporte/ Moulit loings, lors voulsisse estre morte!” de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 48, lines 1234–1239; *Mutation of Fortune* in *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan* trans. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kevin Brownlee, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Norton, 1997), 105. See also de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 46–50; lines 1159–1312. It is clear throughout her writing that Christine’s grief at her husband’s death was not feigned, but by the time she was writing this particular narrative, she was able to take some distance from it.

¹⁶See Dessens, J., and J.T. Snow, 1989: “Tornadoes in France,” *Weather Forecasting*, 4, 110–132.

thus succeeding Elijah in his role. Elijah told him the request would be granted but only if Elisha witnessed him being “taken away.” Though Christine does not, to my knowledge, refer to her husband as a prophet, she does at times cast herself in that role. Elisha did witness Elijah being taken away (by a whirlwind, accompanied with chariots and fire) and thus his request was granted. It is very possible that Christine is attempting to evoke this imagery here. So, even in the story of her beloved husband’s death, which was the tragic origin of her need to take up the writing she did to provide for her family, she is already beginning to cast herself as someone who has the legitimation to take over certain roles that would normally be closed to her.

Eventually finding a way out of her despair, Christine turned the aftermath of her husband’s death to a purpose other than mourning, though if her stories are any clue, she continued to grieve as well. Her loss freed her from the constraints (and protections) a married woman would have had, and forced her to take on a “man’s role.” But in order to write herself into that role, Christine could not, in the eyes of the culture in which she lived, be a “woman.” Thus she relates to her reader,

It is now time for me to recount the strange case, the unusual account (as I had promised at the beginning of this book, where I placed my name) of how, when I returned to Fortune, I was changed from woman to man, which is a very marvelous thing. And it is not a lie or a fable to speak according to metaphor which does not exclude truth. For Fortune has enough power over those whom she rules to effect much greater miracles.¹⁷

Or est il temps que je raconte/ L'estrange cas, le divers compte,/ Si
comme au premier je promis/ De cestui livre, ou mon nom mis,/ Si
Comment de femme homme devins,/ Quant chieus Fortune je revins,/ Si
Qui trop est chose merveillable/ Et si n'est mençonge, ne fable,/ A parler
selon methafore,/ Qui pas ne met verité fore,/ Car Fortune a bien la puis-
sance/ Sur ceulx de son obeissance/ Faire miracles trop greigneurs.¹⁸

Here, not only has she prepared us for the narrative of her literary sex change, she also and at the same time gives her reader an insight into

¹⁷de Pizan, *Mutation*, 102.

¹⁸de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 41–42; lines 1025–1037.

her narrative theory with regard to fictionalizations: “*si n'est mençonge, ne fable, a parler selon methafore, qui pas ne met verité fore*”: “it is not a lie or a fable to speak according to metaphor which does not exclude truth.” She admits her story is a metaphor, but insists that it is nevertheless capable of truth-telling. In addition, she stresses that there are many more marvelous or stranger miracles that Fortune could perform than simply changing someone's gender.¹⁹ It is also worth noting that it is Lady Fortune who effects this change, not Lady Nature or Lady Reason, and so we can discount that Christine's particular change was either one that happened naturally, or was a reasonable course of action.²⁰ The capriciousness of the goddess in question was well known in literary circles of the time and Fortune's ill repute properly guides how we should see the supposed “necessity” of the transformation itself.

Typical of her time, and as with her later work, Christine did not just tell her story as though it is only hers and unconnected to the rest of the literary tradition: the story she tells of her change is preceded in the narrative by several other related tales. The four stories she briefly recounts are all taken from Ovid, and highlight Fortune's incredible power over human life.²¹ She uses Ovid's stories to give historical/

¹⁹She cites in particular the tale of Ulysses and Circe, where Ulysses' men are turned into pigs (see de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 42; lines 1040–1056; *Mutation*, 102). Other examples could easily be found, and she most likely also had in mind the story of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:33), who was not literally turned into an animal but lost his rational capabilities and began behaving like some animals. Given the political climate around her, however, and Charles VI's bouts of insanity which began in 1392 (the *Mutation* was finished some time around 1403), Christine may have thought it unwise to speak explicitly of Nebuchadnezzar's transformation.

²⁰We may say this because Christine was always very careful with her personifications. It was one of her more adamant criticisms of Jean de Meun's text of the *Rose* that it contained, among others, a personified goddess (Reason) who failed to exemplify her namesake.

²¹These are: the tale of Ulysses' men getting changed to pigs by Circe, the tale of Tiresias changed into a woman (and then changed back again), the tale of Iphis being changed into a man (and remaining one), and she finally references, though does not dwell on, the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski also notes the use of these four stories in an essay on the *Mutation of Fortune*, asserting that they “form part of a poetic autobiography” for Christine. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, “Christine de Pizan and Classical Mythology: Some Examples from the ‘*Mutacion de Fortune*,’” in *The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. M. Zimmerman and D. de Rentiis (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 10. Blumenfeld-Kosinski also traces Christine's

mythical precedent while strengthening her literary ties to a tradition she is seeking both to prove she belongs in and to transform. Christine is explicit about placing her story in their context, telling her reader, “Ovid recounts these miracles, but it is now fitting that I tell you of my own transformation, I who by the visitation of Fortune was changed, transformed from woman to man.”²²

The tale of Iphis, which she recounts at greatest length of the four that frame her transformation, is most interesting in her context since it is the one which also recounts a woman being changed into a man. In this instance, however, the motivation for the change centers on a father who “hates” women, and would have ordered his daughter killed if the mother had not lied by saying she gave birth to a son. The ruse looks like it is about to end in tragedy, however, when the father eventually orders that his now-grown “son” marry a woman he has chosen. Panicked, Iphis’ mother petitions Vesta the hearth-goddess to save them. Vesta obliges, changing the young woman into a man on the day of the wedding.

Christine, on the other hand, becomes a man the day her marriage ends: she is not so much becoming an “appropriate” partner for her spouse but actually *replacing* her spouse—or at least the roles her husband played. Furthermore, while both goddesses in question are spoken of as having “taken pity” on the woman being transformed, Vesta is uninvolved until someone asks her for help, which she obligingly supplies, while Fortune is the one who put Christine in this terrible position in the first place. It sounds as though Fortune acts almost out of guilt, and certainly not according to the desire of the woman she changed. According to Christine, Iphis’ change brings great happiness—but reading Christine’s description of her own change by Fortune, one sees almost the opposite reaction.²³ Even though she represents

interactions with myths in the later portions of the *Mutation*, where she notes that they take on political significance. See especially *ibid.*, 11–14.

²²“Or est il temps que je raconte/ L’estrangle cas, le divers compte,/ Si comme au premier je promis/ De cestui livre, ou mon nom mis,/ Quant chieux Fortune je revins.” de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 41, lines 1025–1030; *Mutation*, 104.

²³Christine writes of Iphis’ mother and her request to Vesta that, “Much [did she] pray to her loved mistress/ until the goddess took pity” “Tant la prya par amistié/ Que la deesse en ot pitié” de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 45, lines 1144–1145. Christine adds that Iphis’ gender transformation causes “joy” and “festivities”; “Joye y ot et feste.” *Mutacion*, 45,

her transformation as saving her and her family, giving her the strength and will to take over captaining the imperiled ship, this does not seem to bring her much joy. In fact, she adds not long after that, "I am still a man and I have been for a total of more than thirteen full years, but it would please me much more to be a woman, as I used to be when I used to talk with Hymen."²⁴

It is clear Christine understands Fortune as a force to be either withstood or bowed to, (depending on one's constitution), not a "teacher" in the proper sense of the word. In contrast to her interactions with Fortune, Christine spends a great deal of time in Socratic-style conversation with the other figures and personifications throughout her works. Yet one wonders whether Fortune speaks with Christine at all. At no point does Christine mention Fortune asking her whether, given the circumstances in which Fortune has put her, she would prefer to be a man. Rather, Fortune decides for Christine. This is very different from the way Christine describes her interactions with her other fictionalized figures, who dialogue at length with her, answering questions and providing guidance rather than authoritarian decisions. They are engaged with Christine's concerns and responsive to the issues she raises with them.²⁵

line 1151. Both translations mine. Of her own transformation Christine writes, "my mourning was so intense my eyes cried so much that Fortune took pity on my unhappiness, and wanted to show her friendship with me, like a good mistress, and help me in my time of trouble: but her help was a marvel! And I do not know if it was more of a danger."; "tant fu mon dueil/ Grief et tant plorerent mi œil/ Que meismes Fortune ot pitié/ De mon meschief, et amistié/ Volt faire, com bonne maistresse,/ Et secourir a ma destrece./ Mais le secours fu merueilleux!/ Ne sçay s'il fu plus perilleux." de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 50–51, lines 1313–1320; *Mutation*, 106.

²⁴"encor suis homme/ Et ay esté ja bien la somme/ De plus de XIII. ans tous entiers./ Mais mieulx me plairoit plus du tiers/ Estre femme, come je souloie./ Quant a Ymeneüs parloie." de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 53, lines 1395–1400; *Mutation*, 107. Christine's change is thus quite different from female to male or male to female transitioning today; it was on the one hand fictional (but "still true") and on the other, not a change she needed for herself but rather one that she perceived was required by her context. Having said that, I hope that there are still resources for Trans people today in Christine's story, despite the contextual differences. Additionally, I continue to refer to Christine using female pronouns because she herself did so, despite calling herself both a man and a woman (depending on the context).

²⁵Although we will see this repeatedly as we progress through Christine's works, one can look, for instance, at what Lady Rectitude says to Christine upon introducing herself: she says she will be Christine's "assistant." See de Pizan, *City*, 13. Lady Nature is

Christine reports Fortune's action, however, as occurring while she is only semi-conscious:

Then my mistress [Fortune] came to me, she who gives joy to many, and she touched me all over my body; she palpated and took in her hands each bodily part, I remember it well; then she departed and I remained, and since our ship was following the waves of the sea, it struck with great force against a rock. I awakened and things were such that, immediately and with certainty, I felt myself completely transformed.²⁶

Adont vers moy vint ma maistresse/ qui a plusieurs la joye estrece/Si me toucha par tout le corps;/ Chacun membre, bien m'en recors,/ Manya et tint a ses mains,/ Puis s'en ala et je remains,/ Et, comme nostre nef alast/ Aux vagues de la mer, frapast/ Contre une roche moult grant cas;/ Je m'esveillay et fu le cas/ Tel qu'incontinent et sanz doubtte/Transmuee me senti toute.²⁷

Lest anyone miss the point that she was now male, Christine continues her description a bit further down; "Then I felt myself much lighter than usual and I felt that my flesh was changed and strengthened, and my voice much lowered, and my body harder and faster... I found my heart strong and bold, which surprised me, but I felt that I had become a true man, and I was amazed at this strange adventure."²⁸

This is indeed a strange adventure she describes, and yet the change of her body's sex which Christine recounts here is necessary within the narrative for her ability to take over captaining the metaphorical "ship" of managing her household. One can see the dire straits to which she has

one exception to this rule, but even she does purportedly speak with Christine at times, as Christine relates in book III.10 of her *Vision*.

²⁶de Pizan, *Mutation*, 106.

²⁷de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 51, lines 1325–1336.

²⁸"Si me senti trop plus legiere/ Que ne souloye et que ma chiere/ Estoit muee et enforcie/ Et ma voix forment engrossie/ Et corps plus dur et plus isnel/... Fort et hardi cuer me trouvay,/ Dont m'esbahi, mais j'esprouvay/ Que vray homme fus devenu;/ Si me suis en estant tenu/ Esmerveillez de l'aventure" de Pizan, *Mutacion*, 51–52, lines 1347–1363; *Mutation*, 106. It is worth noting also that that Christine here laments that during this transformation, her wedding ring fell off her, which grieved her; "Mais choiet de mon doy fu l'anel/ Qu'Ymeneüs donné m'avoit,/ Dont me pesa, et bien devoit,/ Car je l'amoie chierement." *Ibid.*, lines 1352–1355.

been brought, and the need that presses her. She must give up her current perception of herself and her life and exchange it for another that is not only a mental but a social reality. In responding “appropriately” to the change Fortune foisted on her, Christine imitates the authoritative example of her husband by taking over the role of captain. Her imitation is competitive, however, for she will show that she can perform the role “better.” (Such competitive imitation did not necessarily denigrate the authority on which it drew; rather, doing so was often a means of respect). This mode of imitation is called *aemulatio* and is one Christine uses on many occasions, as we will see below.²⁹

The story she has crafted here is a *mimesis* of an authoritative text (Ovid's) that has been transformed in her retelling to fit not only the context of her own life but also the message she wishes to get across to her readers.³⁰ Now, however, it is *she*—her fictionalized self—who is the authoritative figure her audience should see and emulate. Christine-the-ship's-captain is the transformative *exemplum*.³¹ She narrates for her readers the social change that she felt was required in her context—her

²⁹On *aemulatio*, often translated as “emulation,” see Rita Copeland, who cites for example Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28. Jan Ziolkowski also discusses imitation (*imitatio*) and *aemulatio*, calling the latter a “rivalry for distinction” and writing, “*imitatio* in Medieval Latin literary contexts bears a likeness to its predecessor in classical Latin literature, where the word described one class of relationships that bound Roman authors to Greek authors. More closely tied to the original inspiration were texts produced through *interpretatio* (‘translation’); more loosely connected were those that resulted from *aemulatio* (artistic rivalry).” Jan Ziolkowski, “The Highest Form of Compliment: *Imitatio* in Medieval Latin Culture” in *Poetry and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: A Festschrift for Peter Dronke*, ed. John Marenbon (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 301.

³⁰*Mimesis* is not the word Christine would have used, as she did not typically go to Greek vocabulary, but certainly she was familiar with a notion of “imitation” similar to what *mimesis* implies. I use “*mimesis*” here and throughout this work to avoid the modern and negative connotations of “fakeness” that the word imitation has picked up in a twentieth- or twenty-first century context. Such connotations were not necessarily active in Christine's context.

³¹An *exemplum* was something, often a story or figure, that took the role of providing an authoritative and substantive illustration of moral virtue (or vice) which the reader was supposed to understand and emulate (or, in the case of vice, reject). Christine makes frequent use of *exempla*, and comments on her own use of *exempla* in her later work. *The Book of the Body Politic*, saying briefly that they “move one more than simple words.” See Christine de Pizan, *Book of the Body Politic*, trans. Kate Langdon Forhan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 25.

assuming the role of a man—and they in turn are meant to imitate her not necessarily by rewriting their own gender but by appropriately adapting to take over the unusual roles required in dire circumstances.

It is worth recalling here that France, and the very readers to which the *Mutation* was directed and given,³² stood in more and more grim circumstances, and that certain role changes were increasingly required to adapt to the problem of King Charles VI's insanity. With the "captain" of the ship of France "absent" or swept overboard, who could appropriately pilot? Christine does not come right out and ask this, as to say it in plain language could be interpreted as treasonous, but the analogy nevertheless remains discernible between the lines.³³

Even after this transformation, Christine continues to refer to herself as a woman throughout her writing career, though she also continues to speak of having to put aside such things as "womanly fear"—language one must certainly take with a grain of salt, given all the stories of courageous women Christine makes a point of telling in her other books. The strange tales in the *Mutacion*, these "fictions" she presents us with, are other textual ways of being and understanding one's self. They are differences she creates whereby she can demonstrate that no matter what "Fortune" does to a person, it is still possible to recover, take control of one's life, and in so doing plot a course that leads again to safety. A more important lesson for France's beleaguered (and beleaguering) princes could hardly be imagined.

³²Although there is no dedication as such at the opening of the poem, Charity Cannon Willard reports that after finishing the *Mutation* in November of 1403, Christine presented one copy to the Duke of Berry and another to the Duke of Burgundy. She also notes: "Two other manuscripts were copied and illustrated at the same time. It is not certain for whom they were intended, although one must surely have been prepared for the king of France." Willard, *Christine de Pizan*, 107.

³³By offering such a politically inclined reading of her change, I am not implying that Christine did not also use her story of being changed into a man as a form of claiming the necessary authority for herself as a writer. Certainly, this was a major part of her motivations for the narrative sex-change. I am merely arguing the two motivations may be read alongside each other: Christine gains the necessary authority as a writer through rewriting herself as a "man" and she (subtly) offers her fictionalized self as an *exemplum* of someone who was able to rise to the occasion in desperate times to take the role of captain when needed and appropriate.

2.2 TRANSLATING STORIES

One could think of Christine as performing various translations of her life, the literary tradition within which she worked, and the source texts constituting her material.³⁴ Certainly she performed a “translation” of her own body, but she was also engaged in “translating” stories and materials from previous sources to a new context: her context. Even if she is not (typically) a “translator” strictly speaking, one can see how she uses her works to help in the transference of stories from one culture to another—a practice known as the *translatio studii*—both in her reuse of the classical myths, as I detailed in “Changing Bodies” above with Iphis, and through her appropriation of more contemporary Italian literature such as Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Dante.³⁵ Although I have largely dealt with her gender change here as a form of fictionalized autobiographical commentary, it is only part of a much larger context in the *Mutation of Fortune* that uses her life and a lengthy universal history as a means of political commentary. Engaging in the practice of *translatio studii* is one of the frameworks for her *Mutation of Fortune*.³⁶

Since her translations operate as part of this topos, they do not entail a perfect reproduction of the text with which she is working but rather a transformation that is appropriate to a new literary or cultural context. Scholar Rita Copeland notes that, as part of the *translatio studii*, there can be a “framework of cultural rivalry” in the act of translation, citing the Roman practice of the translation of Greek works into Latin, along with all that such translations attempted to accomplish.³⁷ This cultural

³⁴By “translating” I mean here taking authoritative material from one context and adapting it so that it can be understood in a new context. Christine was also able to translate in the more typical sense: presenting the sense of words from one language into a different language. This she did in her *Vision*, translating sections of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* from the Latin copies to which she had access into the French vernacular. I discuss this below in Chap. 4.

³⁵I will cover her engagement with Boccaccio and Petrarch momentarily below, and Dante’s work in Chap. 4.

³⁶Lori Walters gives a brief but good overview of this in her essay “*Translatio studii*: Christine de Pizan’s Self-Portrayal in Two Lyric Poems and in the *Livre de la mutacion de Fortune*” in *Christine de Pizan and Medieval French Lyric*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 155–167.

³⁷Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 29. Speaking about the Greek-to-Roman context, Copeland writes, “To understand interlingual translation as essentially substantive in its aim also clarifies how Roman theory conceives translation as a rhetorical activity: the object of

rivalry was also present between Italy and France, particularly when it came to literature, as Earl Jeffrey Richards has argued concerning the debate over the *Roman de la Rose* in which Christine played so large a role.³⁸ It is apparent that Christine was self-conscious about this practice in her texts. In a move not surprising given her use of the translation topos and this implicit cultural rivalry, she occasionally plays on the fact that she too has Italian heritage, though she is explicit and insistent that she has made France her home.³⁹ More importantly, this “translation” entails the goal of making the “new” or “translated” material relevant for one’s audience to pick up and use in their own lives. This tale Christine tells us of Fortune changing her body is therefore “strange,” but it is one she felt was necessitated by her society’s stories of what it meant to be male and female, and with a likely eye toward encouraging the princes—and perhaps even the Queen—to take hold of the wheel of France and chart a course out of their current peril.

Within just two years of writing the *Mutation*, Christine will undertake a new project, the *Book of the City of Ladies*, which pointedly and systematically attempted to undermine problematic definitions of women, allowing her readers the ability to see women differently than much of the literary tradition had previously portrayed them. Having written about the change of gender that her work and situation

translation is difference with the source, and the act of translating is comparable to the act of inventing one’s own argument out of available topics.” Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 30. We will soon see how important this “difference with the source” is for Christine in constructing her own arguments when I examine her compilationary practice in the *City of Ladies*.

³⁸See his “Introduction” to the critical anthology *Debating the Roman de la Rose*: ed. Christine McWebb (New York: Routledge, 2007), esp. page xxvii.

³⁹In her *Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, for instance, she says to Minerva, upon whom she calls for assistance, “like you, I am an Italian woman.” It has thus been suggested by scholar Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, commenting on the same passage, that Christine herself actually embodies a kind of translation: “Née en Italie comme Minerve dans les interprétations évhéméristes, elle sera une nouvelle Minerve: ‘O Minerve, deesse d’armes et de chevalerie!... je suis comme toy femme ytalienne’ Venue d’Italie en France, elle incarnera dans cette trajectoire le mouvement de la *translatio studii* de l’est vers l’ouest.” Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, “L’étrangère,” *Revue des langues romanes* 92 (1988): 240. This sentiment is echoed by Lori Walters, who notes, “In comparing herself to Minerva, Christine implicitly presents herself as the fulfillment of the *translatio studii*, the transmission of learning from Greece to Rome and then to France.” Walters, “*Translatio studii*,” 155.

necessitated, she perceived that there needed to be new stories of women; stories that show women as capable of those things which the *Mutation* still appeared to assume they are not. And again, in good scholarly fashion, Christine turns to the previous literary tradition to supply her with such stories through her “translating” work. The stories she gathered, however, did not yet have the form she required of them, since they came from the tradition which had already proved itself to be so problematic. They needed to be regathered and then rewritten to be able to effect the change Christine desired.

In order to collate and change these stories at the same time, Christine turns to the practice of compiling; an already well-developed mode of textual production in her time, and one she had made use of in the *Mutation*. In general terms, a medieval compiler produced a compilation or *compilatio*, a work that takes the material of two or more extant texts and re-presents them together in another format.⁴⁰ Insofar as Christine's works make use of this practice, there have been scholars who do not see her as properly an “author” of those works, but this understanding does not do the situation justice.⁴¹ Christine added quite a bit

⁴⁰Giving a more precise definition than this is a rather challenging, since it can be difficult for a modern scholar to grasp the scope that the practice of compilation encompassed. This is due in part to contradictory views articulated by medieval writers themselves. According to the categories supplied by Bonaventure, which A.J. Minnis outlines in his work *Medieval Theories of Authorship*, “The scribe is subject to materials composed by other men which he should copy as carefully as possible *nihil mutando*. The *compilator* adds together or arranges the statements of other men, adding no opinion of his own (*addendo, sed non de suo*). The *commentator* strives to explain the views of others, adding something of his own by way of explanation. Finally and most importantly, the *auctor* writes *de suo* but draws on the statements of other men to support his own views.” A.J. Minnis, *Authorship*, 94–95. While Minnis cites Bonaventure's definitions, he later adds the caveat “But, of course, many medieval compilers were accustomed to including something out of their own heads, of adding some personal assertion to their reportage.” *Ibid.*, 200.

⁴¹Joël Blanchard makes an argument similar to this when he asserts in his essay on Christine's use of compilation and legitimization, “The compiler is not an author but the operator of the text of others.” Joël Blanchard, “Compilation and Legitimation in the Fifteenth Century: *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*” in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, 247. In saying so, however, Blanchard is not following Bonaventure's description of the roles of writers vis-à-vis their texts (see previous note) but rather argues that Christine does work significant change, in tone at least, on her sources. He, however, asserts that she does so in “bad faith” (*ibid.*, 232), constructing an “antifeminist” tradition where there was none. (“Christine unleashed the scandal and converted their [the pro-*Rose* camp] perspective into something different which was more striking: antifeminism... This artifice must be constantly kept in mind in order to gage Christine's good faith. A literary

of her own to those texts she approached as a compiler, both in terms of reshaping or commenting on the material she took and also adding vital elements, whole sections, or even entire narrative frameworks that did not exist in any of the original source materials.⁴² Such an approach was widespread as a matter of practice, even if precluded by medieval theory, and Christine makes full use of it.

The first step in creating a *compilatio* was prior reading: one had to research and choose sources, then decide what to take from those sources, and how to place them in the new text being compiled. These choices and how one ordered what one took had the ability to significantly shape the way the compiled materials related to each other and to the subject being addressed, even if not a single word included was actually changed. This shaping occurred in part because in ordering those original sources the compiler had to first take them apart, performing a *divisio* on the source texts he or she had chosen. Initially, *divisio* is a rhetorical tool used to divide up the text into smaller pieces to make it easier to understand and remember. However, once a text is taken apart (divided) it has lost its structural integrity. Its parts—which might not be divided along lines the original author may have intended or even recognize—no longer relate to each other or to the whole in the way they did pre-division. Furthermore, in using *divisio* as a means of *constructing* a compilation instead of just as a way to approach and remember a specific text, those parts must also be ordered in relation to the other material in the compilation, so that all parts fit with the new whole. Some

theme—antifeminism—which, to be precise, lacked any real historical or sociological reference, served as her alibi to speak more freely of something else: the book as such.” Ibid., 230.) He asserts that she does this purely to legitimate her writing and support her fascination with textual production. Having read many of the philosophers and church fathers who wrote prior to Christine, I find Blanchard’s assertion implausible. He does, however, give an interesting discussion of the practice of compilation, though I believe he relies too heavily on anachronistically weighted conceptions of violence to the text. See in particular the latter half of his essay, *ibid.*, 235–247.

⁴²Christine does all three of these, for example, in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, which I treat at length below. Certainly, the trope of the three goddesses appearing to her and claiming to set the record straight about the worth of women via a dialogue with the narrator was not present in any of the texts upon which she draws, and she adds whole sections for the framework of building the “city” as well. She also significantly revises many of the stories she takes.

material from each is likely to be left out. Division is thus refined into a hermeneutical tool that produces order and understanding. In fact, Rita Copeland shows that “division” can be seen as an ethical activity.⁴³

Mary Carruthers also notes this and gives an example. In her *Book of Memory*, she recalls the story of Paolo and Francesca in Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, where the lovers read and performed a poor *divisio* on a particular text. This improper reading is what moves them to improper ethical action, for it is in reading only *part* of the account of Lancelot and Guinevere in their amorous (mis)adventures, that Paolo and Francesca are moved to do likewise. They stopped reading too soon, once Lancelot and Guinevere began kissing, and did not see what happened afterward: that the two lovers were caught by a third character.⁴⁴ Carruthers writes, “This presents their fault as one of poor *divisio* and incomplete reading, rather than of ‘wrong’ interpretation according to some transcendental norm.”⁴⁵ Or, as she puts it a little further on,

I am not really suggesting that the lovers' only fault was one of punctuation—yet they did not punctuate wisely. ‘Solo un punto’ did them in, says Francesca, one little mark of punctuation... since *divisio* produced the

⁴³On the use of *divisio* as a hermeneutical tool, Copeland states, “The most basic principle of the *compilatio* is *divisio*: division of the text and the ordering of its parts. Under the impress of Aristotelian science, *divisio* is, moreover, an epistemological principle, an understanding of the categories of knowledge in terms of relation and subordination.” Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 207. She notes that Gower's text (the *Confessio amantis*) “uses the academic system of *divisio* to achieve its directive of ethical rehabilitation. But the use of the system of *divisio* in this way also turns the textual activity of *divisio* into a form of ethical action... As a means of achieving these ethical objectives, the hermeneutical tool of *divisio* becomes a kind of action upon the inherited materials that form the text: it delineates the various components of ethical teaching and makes those components accessible and understandable as parts of a large system of practical wisdom.” Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 218.

⁴⁴Speaking of Paolo and Francesca having stopped just after the kiss without proceeding further, Carruthers writes, “Had they read the next clause of the sentence after that point, they would have read that Lancelot and Guinevere's illicit love-making was instantly discovered... Indeed (to learn from this example) every illicit love affair has its ‘Lady of Malohaut,’ [the jealous woman who saw them] and it is only a matter of time (often not long) before she shows up; thus their fear of her watchful and dangerous eyes, to those who have read far enough in the book to be concerned about her, should be enough to check passion. But Paolo and Francesca failed to get to the crucial ‘point.’” Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 187.

⁴⁵Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 187.

building blocks of memory, and hence of education and character, punctuation was not an altogether trifling affair. It was crucial, as it still is, to the intelligibility of a text, but it was also crucial ethically, given the role that reading and memorizing played in the formation of moral judgments.⁴⁶

It was their improper reading practice that damns them, which is how they end up in the *Inferno*.

The ethical activity of division is not limited to the reader only, however, but also extends to the writer who makes the text. Copeland cites John Gower's *Confessio amantis*, the tale of a lover's confession to Genius to obtain absolution, arguing that Gower is using the tools of a compiler in order to both make his point through the ordering of his text and also as a claim to the authority of his text.⁴⁷ That this text differs significantly from his sources is part of Gower's purpose, accomplished through his use of these rhetorical/hermeneutical tools. In Copeland's words, which we will use to shine a light on Christine's practice:

As a compiler, Gower quite literally makes a new book out of inherited materials: the structure of his text confers new meaning on his sources, which are now organized to pertain to different stages of sin and to exemplify the laws of human and divine love. It is for this reason as well that the classical tales are transformed in the retelling, abbreviated, amplified, and refigured so as to comply with their new textual purpose. At this most fundamental level, Gower as a vernacular transmitter and transformer of the classics carries out the inventional precepts of the *artes poetriae*: out of the procedures of exegetical service, *enarratio poetarum*, he discovers and asserts rhetorical difference with his sources.⁴⁸

One can already begin to see Christine doing this in her interactions with classical texts in the *Mutation of Fortune*, but as we will see, by the time she writes the *City of Ladies*, where she again works with the

⁴⁶Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 187–188.

⁴⁷“Gower uses academic discourse for the explicit task of political rehabilitation, and it is of necessity a *vernacular* academic discourse that he deploys for this purpose. He takes over the hermeneutical techniques of *compilatio*, and structures an exegetical voice for the text in the figure of Genius, and in making this exegetical apparatus refer to his own text he establishes his own claims, in this vernacular context, to the powerful role of *auctor*.” Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 219. Emphasis in text.

⁴⁸Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 207.

compilatio format, her use of this practice is even more pronounced. As both Christine and Gower make clear, the *compilatio* is a tricky work, with relationships to its *auctores* and sources that are difficult to define. Moreover, one of the first things that becomes evident through the process of division and ordering is that categories that are nominally distinct—those of *compilator* and *commentator*, and perhaps even *auctor*—become easily enmeshed.

In fact, we see by looking at several compilations/commentaries, Christine's and others', that the exercise of dividing and reorganizing the text was of fundamental importance. Ordering did not simply organize meaning: in some ways, it *produced* meaning. It certainly enabled new meaning to grow out of older texts. Christine effects exactly this in her compilations, and her ability to do so is crucial to accomplishing her goal of changing the way society views and acts toward women—as well as any other social change for which she is arguing. Drawing on others' work gave her texts authoritative weight while involving the literary tradition she was attempting to transform. Using the form of compilation to “translate” problematic textual sources and supplant the very sources on which she draws, she has the chance to replace their misogynist views with her own revised perceptions of the worth, virtue, and capability of women. Thus, even as she takes a story from an *auctor* like Ovid or Boccaccio, when she comments on, revises, and re-presents that story in a different light, readers will be primed to remember her revised exemplars instead of the earlier ones.⁴⁹

A deepening understanding of all that could be accomplished by mining authoritative texts for stories and then rewriting them is, I believe, largely what prompts Christine to pen the *City of Ladies* two years after the *Mutation of Fortune*. The context she inhabited was destructive. She

⁴⁹There is some evidence that this persisted even when people were reading Boccaccio's story, not Christine's version of it. Diane Wolfthal, for instance, notes that in one manuscript of Boccaccio's text (Spencer 33) that was produced around 1470, well after Christine wrote the *City of Ladies*, the artist illuminated *Christine's* version of the story of the rape of the Galatian Queen instead of Boccaccio's. In Boccaccio's tale, the Queen orders her rapist beheaded, and one of her soldiers does the dirty work, but in Christine's version the Queen attacks the rapist herself and beheads him, presenting his head to her husband as a trophy. See Diane Wolfthal, “Douleur sur toutes autres”: Revisualizing the Rape Script in the *Epistre Othea* and the *Cité des dames*” in *Christine de Pizan and the Categories of Difference*, ed. Marilynn Desmond (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 65–67 (illumination showed on 66).

must make a new one, and she will use previous sources to do so, creating thereby through a combination of compilation, commentary, and her own constructive writing a “New Kingdom of Femininity.”⁵⁰

2.3 COMPILATION, COMMENTARY, AND CONSTRUCTION

One can see how the genre of the *compilatio* is an apt vehicle for Christine’s project of redefining women through stories, since it will allow her to work with previous material from the literary tradition while still commenting on and even changing it. And she does so in her *City of Ladies*, to great effect. There—as we covered briefly in the introduction—Christine-the-narrator recounts how she was studying, “following the practice that has become the habit of my life,” when she picks up a misogynist book and begins to read it. Although she admits the book is of “no authority” and in fact “not very pleasant for people who do not enjoy lies,”⁵¹ she falls to reflecting on the sheer number of *auctores* who report bad things about women. As she reflects, she begins to question her own knowledge about herself, even against her better judgment. Although she believes herself and most women to be virtuous and not act as this book (the *Lamentations of Mathéolus*) says women do, she nevertheless notes that many of the authorities say otherwise. She tells her reader, “judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the 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 behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice.”⁵² She recounts that she struggles with this notion of the

⁵⁰This is the phrase Lady Rectitude herself uses to describe the *City of Ladies* to Christine: “Now a New Kingdom of Femininity is begun, and it is far better than the earlier kingdom of the Amazons, for the ladies residing here will not need to leave their land in order to conceive or give birth to new heirs to maintain their possessions throughout the different ages.”; “Et ores est un nouvel royaume de Femenie encomencé; mais trop plus est digne que celluy de jadis, car ne couvendra aux dames ycy herbergiees aler hors de leurs terres pour concevoir ne enfanter nouvelles heritieres pour maintenir leur possession par divers aages.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 815; *City*, 117.

⁵¹“Selonc la maniere que j’ay en usage, et a quoy est disposé le exercice de ma vie;” “nulle attorité;” “semblast pas moult plaisant a gent qui ne se delittent en mesdit,” de Pizan, *Cité*, 616, 617 and 617 again, respectively; *City*, 3, all three citations.

⁵²“mais generaument aucques en tous traittiez philosophes, pouettes, tous orateurs desquelz les noms seroit longue chose, semble que tous parlent par une meismes bouche et

inherent wickedness of women for a while, attempting to prove its falsity but is eventually overpowered by the sheer weight of the literary tradition she has inherited. Right after “deciding God formed a vile creature when he made woman,” Christine reports,

I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned to make such an abominable work which, from what they say, is the vessel as well as the refuge and abode of every evil and vice. As I was thinking this, a great unhappiness and sadness welled up in my heart, for I detested myself and the entire feminine sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature.⁵³

Christine's account of the misogyny she read and applied to her own life is emotionally charged, albeit in an amplified way, and she uses her amplification to demonstrate the incapacitating power of such reading.⁵⁴ Some critics have even argued that consideration of Mathéolus' book positions Christine to demonstrate the damaging effects of faulty reading habits and poor use of *divisio*.⁵⁵ In any case, to counter the harm of the

tous accordent une semblable conclusion, determinant les meurs femenins enclins et plains de tous les vices.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 618; *City*, 4.

⁵³“je determinoye que ville chose fist Dieux quant il fourma femme, en m'esmerveillant comment si digne ouvri[e]r daigna oncques faire tant abominable ouvrage qui est vaissel, au dit d'iceulx, si comme le retrait et herberge de tous maulx et de tous vices. Adonc moy estant en ceste penssee, me sourdi une grant desplaisance et tristesse de couraige en desprisant moy meismes et tout le sexe feminin, si comme ce ce [sic] fust monstre en nature.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 620; *City*, 5. Brackets in text. “Nature” is a hugely important concept and figure in the work of Christine and it is likely that here Christine is drawing on Aristotelian accounts of reproduction, where Nature “intends” to make male creatures. Christine seems to indicate this by questioning Lady Reason whether it is in fact true that Nature is “ashamed” when she makes a female, since she has read in what she calls a text falsely attributed to Aristotle that females are only formed through some weakness or impotence during the reproductive process. See *City*, 22–23. I will discuss this further below.

⁵⁴Amplification, *amplificatio*, is a frequent intellectual tool in medieval rhetorical theory. See, for instance, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's work *Poetria Nova*, written as a rhetorical treatise around the turn of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, and in particular his section on amplification: Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1967), 24–40.

⁵⁵I tend to agree with this contention and in fact will discuss reading practices as Christine portrays them with regards to the education of her readers at length in Chap. 4 of this book, though there I work with Christine's *Vision*. On this particular section of the *City of Ladies*, however, Glenda McLeod argues in an excellent essay that Christine is consciously trying to show the ill effects a poor reading of a text, and particularly a poor

reading she has done, nothing short of the appearance of not one but three goddess-figures—Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice—is required. Having appeared in Christine’s study and called her back to herself, they proceed to tell her that they have a charge for her. She is to build a city for all ladies of worth, and they will help her do so.

In the opening portion of her narrative, Christine presents her reader the “story” she has heard that “the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice.” This misogynist premise could be found in numerous documents, not the least of which was the work she mentions at the opening of the *City* (the *Lamentation of Mathéolus*). There is, however, another type of misogynistic attitude she will also have to address if she really wishes to counter misogynist definitions of women. This second detrimental description of women was the background for her gender transformation in the *Mutation of Fortune*: an understanding of the feminine sex as weaker and incompetent.⁵⁶ The first change Christine makes when she writes/compiles the *City*, therefore, is to arrange her material in response to the goddesses’ and her own narrative persona’s questions, *not* as her sources had arranged the material. Christine’s new text is fundamentally dialogical. This allows her to present her stories as responding to specific questions which she as the writer raises, rather than as simply being stories of “famous women,” as the work by Boccaccio, for instance, presented them. Since all of her stories are retold in the context of answering a particular question or worry that Christine-the-narrator puts to her divine interlocutors,⁵⁷ she is able to reorient all the stories

divisio, can have on people. See Glenda McLeod, “Poetics and Antimisogynist Polemics in Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*” in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 40. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski echoes a sentiment like this in her essay “Christine de Pizan and the Misogynist Tradition” (*Selected Writings*, 303).

⁵⁶She both showcases and exemplifies at least tacit acknowledgment of this particular aspect of misogyny in her description of the “sex change” in the *Mutation*, though, as I said earlier, I believe there is room to understand her as at least partly employing the method of exaggeration/amplification to make the point she will make more forcefully and directly in the *City*: women can be just as strong and competent as men.

⁵⁷Although I have already discussed how Christine created a narrative “persona” to act as an *exemplum* in the *Mutation*, from here onward I will often make a distinction between “Christine-the-narrator” (the fictional character who constitutes that persona) and simply Christine (the real person who existed and wrote the books.) By making this distinction, I mean to remind us that the “Christine” who appears as a character in the allegorical works

she uses from her sources such that they function as proofs of women's strength, courage, skill, and loyalty.

Christine first tackles claims that women are weaker, less intelligent, and generally incompetent, working with Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* in the earlier portion of her book but changing his text in critical ways to highlight women's strength, intelligence, and competence. She begins with an exchange with Lady Reason, who acknowledges that men do seem (generally) to have a physical advantage. Reason maintains nevertheless that women are capable of great feats of arms and strength, taking pains to list many women, like the Amazons, who engaged and even prospered in martial activities.⁵⁸

This example is repeated elsewhere, as in the stories of women like Zenobia. Zenobia is an excellent example of Christine's work redefining women, since she embodies many of the characteristics Christine is defending. After her husband's untimely death, we read that Zenobia takes control of the kingdom, rules it wisely, and proves she is not just

I am discussing here is a literary creation, crafted by an extraordinarily creative and literately astute writer who was purposefully using these stories and the personifications/characters within them to shape specific arguments and advocate for particular social/political transformations. Forgetting that "Christine" as she appears in her own texts is also a fictional creation runs the risk of misconstruing some of Christine's writerly purpose, since her "Christine" persona voices opinions at times that Christine the writer does not herself hold and is actually trying to undermine. She places these faulty opinions in her persona's mouth in order that her persona can be corrected by sympathetic figures who help "her" (and thereby her readers) toward a better understanding of the issue at hand. Christine-the-narrator models to her readers appropriate learning and appropriate response to correction from prudent authority.

⁵⁸In one of her stories of the Amazons, she gives an account of Hercules that insists he feared the Amazons more than anything else. Here Reason tells Christine-the-narrator: "When, after a short while, they had approached Amazonia, Hercules, notwithstanding his fabulous strength and boldness and his large army of such valiant soldiers, did not dare to come into port nor to land during the day, so much did he fear the great power and daring of these women. This would be fantastic to repeat and hard to believe if so many historical writings did not attest to it, that a man who could not be conquered by the power of any creature feared the strength of women"; "Et quant aucques en furent aprouchié, Hercules, nonobstant sa tres merueilleuse force et hardiesce et qui si grant ost de vaillant gent avoit avecques luy, n'osa oncques prendre port par jour ne descendre sur terre, tant ressongnoit la grant force et hardies/ ce d'icelles. Laquel chose seroit merueilleuse a dire et forte a croire se tant d'istoyres ne le tesmoingnoyent, que homme qui oncques par puissance de creature ne pot estre vaincu redoubtast force de femmes." de Pizan, *Cité*, 688; *City*, 45.

skilled at battle but also with government and scholarship. Lady Reason explains,

the high point of her virtues... [was] her profound learnedness in letters, both in those of the Egyptians and in those of her own language. When she rested, she diligently applied herself to study and wished to be instructed by Longinus the philosopher, who was her master and introduced her to philosophy. She knew Latin as well as Greek, through the aid of which she organized and arranged all historical works in concise and very careful form. Similarly, she desired that her children, who she raised with strict discipline, be introduced to learning. Therefore my dear friend, note and recall if you have ever seen or read of any prince or knight more complete in every virtue.⁵⁹

Martially capable and physically strong, wise in her management of government, and a well-lettered scholar who is not only knowledgeable but who also produces new orderings of previous scholarship (as Christine herself is engaged in doing), Zenobia demonstrates a thorough understanding and ordering of her context. Yet the story of Zenobia also shows how Christine uses compilation and commentary to change a source text in service of her redefinitions. Boccaccio, from whom Christine draws this story, calls Zenobia strong and competent, but even though he indicates that many sources portrayed her as virtuous, he casts doubt on her virtue. Regarding Maconius' murder of Zenobia's husband and his son Herodes, Boccaccio writes, "Some authors say Maconius acted through envy. Others believe that Zenobia had consented to Herodes' death because she had often condemned his softness and so that her sons Herennianus and Timolaus, whom she had borne to Odaenathus, might succeed to the kingdom."⁶⁰ Christine omits any

⁵⁹"le comble de ses vertus... elle fu tres aprise en lettres, en celles des Egyptiens et en celles de leur langage. Et quant elle estoit a repos, adonc diligentment vaquoit a l'estude, et voulst estre aprise par Longin le philosophe, qui fu son maistre et l'introduisi en philosophie. Sce[u]t le latin et les lettres grecques, par l'ayde desquelles elle meismes toutes les hystoires soubz briesves parolles ordena et mist moult curieusement. Et semblablement voulst que ses enfans, qu'elle nourrissoit en grant discipline, fussent introduyz en science. Sy nottes et avises, chiere amie, se tu as point veu ne leu de quelconques prince ou chevalier plus universel en toutes les vertus." de Pizan, *Cité*, 706; *City*, 54–55.

⁶⁰Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1964), 227.

reference to such questions of Zenobia's involvement in the death of her husband or his child by a previous marriage. She also leaves out the end of Zenobia's story which Boccaccio recounts, where she is finally routed and brought as a captive in chains to Rome. In Christine's version, no mention is made of where Zenobia ends her days. She has "cut" the original text, abbreviating some aspects of the story and amplifying others in service of her goals; Christine's account of Zenobia's life finishes with the lengthy reflection I cited above, which emphasizes the queen's great learning—a clear difference of emphasis from Boccaccio's text, which ends with an account of Zenobia's defeat.

Even where Boccaccio and Christine agree on the details of the story, their presentation of its elements varies significantly. How one tells the story affects what a reader will take from it. They both agree Zenobia was a very chaste woman who would only sleep with her husband in order to become pregnant, but comparing what they have to say on that subject is illuminating. Boccaccio writes,

she was so virtuous that not only did she keep away from other men but I have read that she never gave herself to her husband Odaenathus, while he was alive, except to conceive children. She was so careful of this that after lying with her husband once she would abstain long enough before the next time to see whether she had conceived, and if she had she would not let him touch her again until she had given birth. But if she found that she had not conceived, she would give herself to her husband at his request. How praiseworthy was this decision by a woman! It is clear that she thought sexual desire is given to men by Nature for no other reason than to preserve the species through continuous procreation, and beyond this it is a superfluous vice. However, women having similar moral scruples are very rarely found.⁶¹

Compare this, then, with Christine's much abbreviated speech on the matter: "This woman was supremely chaste. Not only did she avoid other men, but she also slept with her husband only to have children, and demonstrated this clearly by not sleeping with her husband when she was pregnant."⁶²

⁶¹Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 228.

⁶²"Ceste estoit de souveraine chasteté, car non pas seullement des autres hommes se gardoit, mais meesment avec son mary ne vouloit gesir fors pour avoir lignee: et ce

Though it may not seem so on an initial reading, the difference here is quite pointed. Although Christine does include the portion on Zenobia's chaste living, she treats the matter much more briefly than her source and does not attempt to use such a story to teach her audience sexual mores.⁶³ She includes no commentary on whether or not this was a praiseworthy decision that should be emulated by other women, focusing her commentary instead on Zenobia's intellectual qualities. Nor does she use what she does include about Zenobia's chastity, as Boccaccio does, to accuse the majority of women of being incapable of or unwilling to live chastely. Without telling her readers what she is up to, she effectively replaced Boccaccio's version of the story, defective in its portrayal of women, with her own tale more truthful to what she sees as the nature and capacities of women. In abbreviating or amplifying a work, rather large shifts can be effected. In fact, as her leaving out the end of Zenobia's life indicates, Christine does not blush to change the story entirely, contradicting her sources without even pausing to note that she has done so.

Was such writerly action acceptable? As I have previously noted, Rita Copeland has already remarked on its use as a practice among medieval writers, so Christine was hardly the first. There is additional precedent for this significant but unmentioned difference from a source text, however, and from no less a source than the Bible itself—that untrumpable

demonstroit elle magniffestement par ce que point n'y couschoit quant ençainte estoit." de Pizan, *Cité*, 705; *City*, 54.

⁶³In fact, it can reasonably be concluded from Christine's poetry that she did not hold the opinion that sexual desire existed merely for the continuation of the species and aside from that it is, as Boccaccio alleged, "superfluous vice." Although Christine frequently advised women to avoid sex outside of marriage, the arguments she makes have more to do with the social dangers and vulnerability such relationships entailed for women than any specifically "it's immoral" argument. Furthermore, when she speaks of sexual intimacy in her poetry, it is often couched in erotic language and does not shy away from desire. See, for example, her poem "Ballad XXVI" from *More Ballads*, translated as *A Sweet Thing is Marriage*, with its talk of the speaker's wedding night (complete with a hundred kisses) and repeated line "surely the gentle man loves me well" or its claim, "he makes me mad with desire for love." The original can be seen in Harley MS 4431 f.42v; http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_4431. The translation I have cited is by June Hall McCash in *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard: (New York: Persea, 1994), 51.

authority in Christine's context. Paul the Apostle works similarly in his letter to the Galatians.⁶⁴ In fact, the problem facing Paul as a writer was in many ways similar to the problems faced by a medieval translator, commentator, or compiler. Both he and the medieval scholar are confronted with a text, perhaps of no small authority, which they must at the same time make accessible to their generation and also make speak to the issues of their time. In Galatians, where Paul is trying to argue for an understanding of being a follower of Christ that does not necessitate embracing such practices as circumcision, he purposefully shapes his presentation of parts of Scripture such that they are transformed to directly support his aims and his authority, whether or not this conforms with how they had been narrated in the previous scriptural sources on which he drew.

In chapter four of his epistle, he presents the story of Sarah and Hagar to draw a distinction between "two covenants:" "These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants."⁶⁵ The distinction Paul wishes to make is that Hagar (the slave woman), represents previous Mosaic law that required practices such as circumcision, while Sarah (the free woman), represents the new covenant and its corresponding "freedom." Paul then makes a crucial exegetical citation to support his interpretation, drawing on his textual source, the story from Genesis. He writes, "But what does Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son.'"⁶⁶ He is, of course, applying this to his rivals, those preaching adherence to Mosaic law. They are the ones to be gotten rid of, while he is the legitimate son and heir who should be heeded.

If one goes back to the story in Genesis on which Paul is drawing, however, one finds that although those words do occur in Genesis (that is, in Scripture) they are spoken by Sarah (who is not only the free

⁶⁴Although it does not cover the story of Sarah and Hagar that I am about to discuss, for another example of Paul's practice as himself an interpreter of Scripture, see Maris G. Fiondella's article comparing Paul's work with exegetical practice specifically in the fifteenth century: "The Letter to the Galatians, the Towneley Plays, and the Construction of Christian Hermeneutic Authority" *Acta XVIII* (1991): 119–129.

⁶⁵Galatians 4:24 in Paul's text; his story is originally drawn from Genesis 21:8–21. All Biblical citations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁶⁶Galatians 4:30.

woman but also the angry and jealous wife): not by Abraham, nor as commentary within the narrative by whomever the writer of Genesis was, and certainly not by the person of God, who *is* present at that point in the text as a figure who speaks.⁶⁷ Furthermore, within the Genesis narrative, God reassures Abraham that although he should listen to Sarah's demand and send Hagar and the child away, Ishmael (Hagar's child with Abraham) *will* be given an inheritance like Abraham's child with Sarah, and Ishmael will also be blessed and made into a "great nation."⁶⁸ The narrative states that once Hagar and her child have been sent away, God sends an angel to Hagar, who finds water for her and her son, and the writer of Genesis comments "God was with the boy as he grew up."⁶⁹

The Genesis account is a far cry from Paul's interpretation in Galatians—in fact, his conclusion explicitly and purposefully contradicts the earlier story's conclusion. It is worth noting additionally that readings of Paul's version of the story have at times been used as one of the primary supports for particularly dismissive understandings of the relationship of Christianity to the tradition, Judaism, out of which it came. Thus, this is a strong example of an interpretation of a story effecting a significant transformation of a tradition.⁷⁰ Paul invests the figures of

⁶⁷It was the words of God's promise to Abraham, then called Abram, that set the whole narrative up to begin with. See Genesis 15.

⁶⁸"God heard the boy crying and the angel of God came to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'what is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.'" Genesis 21:17–18. See also Genesis 17:18–22.

⁶⁹Genesis 21:20.

⁷⁰In fact, it could and has been argued that great harm has come of Paul's interpretation of the story of Hagar and Sarah and, more specifically, from the tradition of how it has been read. In the words of Susan Grove Eastman, "In this exegetical tradition the negative signification of Paul's quotation of Gen. 21:10 falls completely on one historic group of people. The disastrous effects of such an interpretation are amply demonstrated by the history of Jewish-Christian relations." Susan Grove Eastman, "Cast out the slave woman and her son: the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28:3 (2006): 311. She notes that there are scholars (herself included) who are currently attempting a less destructive interpretation of Paul's words but indicates such an attempt has largely been confined to the last twenty years, though it has become widely accepted (see *ibid.*, 311). This revised reading of Paul's interpretation is an attempt to make steps toward repairing relations between the two faiths, and preventing further harm from ensuing. One sees even here how important readings of texts can be for constructing lives: Lady Reason's concern over Christine's reading was no idle fear.

the two women with new meaning and presents the story in abbreviated form, amplifying emphasis on aspects of it to make his own point, and dividing up the text in such a way that the comparisons and exclusions he wished to make were supported, whether or not they were supported by his source: the passage in Genesis. He does not tell the beginning or the end of the story but only uses the middle. And he does not tell his audience—a significant portion of which were probably Gentiles, and were thus not as likely to know the original passages well—that he has shifted the story in this way. In so doing his reading differs crucially from his source, so much that the two accounts come to entirely different and opposing conclusions. The story from Genesis blesses and cares for Hagar and Ishmael, offering them a similar promise (to be made into a “great nation”) as was given to Sarah and Isaac, while the story from Galatians rejects the figurative descendants of Hagar, placing them completely outside God’s presence and promises. In Paul’s text, Hagar and Ishmael remain slaves and nothing is said of what happens to them after they leave Abraham and Sarah, or of God’s further involvement in their lives.

While it must be admitted that the Genesis narrative certainly does treat Isaac, Sarah’s son, as the more “legitimate” child, it hardly presents Ishmael as in any way still a slave or as rejected by God. In fact, differences in the way the figure of God in the text treats Ishmael and Isaac are difficult to see. While God did allow Ishmael to be driven from his home under the real threat that he would die of starvation or exposure (but then saved him instead), only shortly after the Hagar/Ishmael story, the Genesis narrative goes on to state that that same God did a similar thing to Isaac, demanding of Abraham that he sacrifice Sarah’s son as a burnt offering and only allowing a substitution at the very last moment.⁷¹ But Paul covers none of that. He only wants to make his completely different point, and to use the authority of Scripture to give his new claims credence. Paul’s move of abbreviating a story and redividing it to come to a different conclusion is precisely what Christine (and later, Irigaray) undertake, though Christine’s abbreviation has the reverse effect of Paul’s. He rewrites the story of Sarah and Hagar in order to exclude a whole group of people—those still preaching “under the law.” Christine rewrites in order to *include* a group that had previously been

⁷¹See Genesis 22:1–14.

excluded or denigrated: women. And we will see in Chap. 3 that Irigaray operates in similar ways.

As Christine proceeds through the construction of her text and the dialogue with Lady Reason, it becomes apparent that not only are specific stories, such as Zenobia's, reinterpreted but also the category of "women" itself, and though Christine takes pains to ensure she presents stories of women known for their martial prowess and physical strength, she also validates the more "typical" physical context of women. The majority of women may be naturally weaker than men, Christine's Reason admits, but she differs with the interpretation that this is a cause for denigrating women.⁷² Rather, she turns such an interpretation on its head and praises women for the very thing which previously was used to reprove them. While a modern scholar (such as myself) might wince at some of the reasoning Lady Reason employs, she is nevertheless attacking the problematic definition of women contemporary to Christine in a way that not only argued great physical strength was not categorically excluded from women but also validated what was seen as the "typical" situation of women. Doing so was important because otherwise Christine's examples could have been read by those contemporary to her as meaning that women could be considered virtuous only insofar as they acted like men.⁷³

⁷²In response to Christine-the-narrator asking Lady Reason about the "proven fact" that women have "weak bodies, tender and feeble in deeds of strength, and are cowards by nature" Reason responds, "Fair friend, I assure you that a large and strong body never makes a strong and virtuous heart... But as for boldness and physical strength, God and Nature have done a great deal for women by giving them such weakness because, at least, thanks to this agreeable defect, they are excused from committing the horrible cruelties, the murders and the terrible and serious crimes which have been perpetrated through force and still continuously take place in the world.;" "Si te promés, belle amie, que le grant et fort corpsage ne fait mie le vertueulx poyssant courage... Mais quant a la hardiesce et telle force de corps, Dieu et Nature, a assez fait pour les femmes qui leur en a donné impotence, car a tout le moins sont elles, par celluy agreeable deffault, excusees de non faire les horribles cruautés, les murdres et les grans et griefs extorcions, lesquelles a cause de force on a fait, et fait on, continuellement au monde." de Pizan, *Cité*, 674–675; *City*, 37.

⁷³Several scholars have argued that this was the tack that Boccaccio—Christine's primary source for this section of the *City*—took. See for example P.A. Phillippy, "Establishing Authority: Boccaccio's 'de Claris mulieribus' and Christine de Pizan's 'Le Livre de la Cité des Dames,'" in *Selected Writings*, 357.

2.4 WOMEN OF INTELLECT AND INVENTION

Christine also, however, offers examples of women who are intelligent without being strong warriors, and esteems them no less. With these stories reimagining women as intelligent, inventive, and ultimately responsible for some of the most important discoveries and institutions of western society, she addresses the other set of issues she had implicitly raised by rewriting her gender in the *Mutation*—that women are not only weaker in body but also in mind and practical competency.

Meeting the issue head-on, Christine-the-narrator herself opens the question of the intellectual capacity of women, asking Lady Reason, “But please enlighten me again, whether it has ever pleased this God who has bestowed so many favors on women, to honor the feminine sex with the privilege of high understanding and great learning [?]. . . I wish very much to know this because men maintain that the mind of women can learn only a little.”⁷⁴ To this Lady Reason retorts, “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 the subtleties of all the arts and sciences as well as sons.”⁷⁵ Reason begins her list of exemplary rebuttals by citing the figure of Cornificia, who was allowed to attend school along with her brother and showed herself capable of mastering all the subjects she was taught, even herself becoming a great poet and writer. In the words of Lady Reason to Christine-the-narrator,

This little girl devoted herself to study and with such marvelous intelligence that she began to savor the sweet taste of knowledge acquired through study. Nor was it easy to take her away from this joy to which she more and more applied herself, neglecting all other feminine activities. She occupied herself with this for such a long period of time that she became a consummate poet, and she was not only extremely brilliant and expert

⁷⁴“Mais encore me faites saige, se il vous plaist, s’il a point pleu a celluy Dieu, qui tant leur fait de graces, de honnourer le sexe femenin par previlecier aucunes d’elles de vertu de hault entendement et grant science [?]. . . Car je le desire moult savoir pour ce que hommes maintiennent qu’entendement de femme est de petite apprehensive.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 720–721; *City*, 63. Brackets mine.

⁷⁵“se coustume estoit de mettre les petites filles a l’escolle et que suyvamment on les faist aprendre les sciences, comme on fait au filz, qu’elles appren/droyent aussi parfaitement et entendoient les soubtilleitez de toutes les ars et sciences comme ilz font.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 721; *City*, 63.

in the learnedness and craft of poetry, but also seemed to have been nourished with the very milk and teaching of perfect philosophy, for she wanted to hear and know about every branch of learning, which she then mastered so thoroughly that she surpassed her brother, who was also a very great poet... Knowledge was not enough for her unless she could put her mind to work and her pen to paper in the compilation of several very famous works.⁷⁶

It is tempting to wonder whether Christine is remembering her own childhood learning, which her father had encouraged. In any case, here again we see imitation and surpassing, *aemulatio*. Cornificia learns along with her brother, imitating the authorities and eventually surpassing even her brother, who “was also a very great poet.” Furthermore (and also like Christine), she too “puts pen to paper” and creates new orderings of knowledge in the form of several compilations.

One should note, however, that in order to excel Cornificia seems to have had to “neglect all other feminine activities.” This is a theme of several of the women Christine writes about (including, at times, herself), but she is careful to also include women who excelled at “feminine activities” and in so doing produced important inventions for humans in society, as we will see below. Nonetheless, there is clearly a tension in Christine’s writing in that she understands that “feminine activities” can deprive a potential female scholar of the time necessary to undertake serious scholarship—as was the case in parts of her own life.⁷⁷

⁷⁶“Mais celle fillette par merueilleux engin tant frequenta les lettres qu’elle prist a sentir le doux goust de savoir par aprendre. Si ne fust mie legiere chose a luy tollir celle plaissance a laquelle, toutes autres oeuvres femenines laissez, s’appliqua du tout en tout. Et tant par espace de temps s’i occupa qu’elle fu tres souveraine pouette, et non pas tant seulement en la science de poisie fu tres flourissant et experte, ains sembloit qu’elle fust nourrie du lait et de la doctrine de philosophie: car elle voulst sentir et savoir de toutes sciences qu’elle apprist souverainement, en tant que son frere, qui tres grant pouette estoit... Et ne luy souffist mie tant seullement le sçavoir, se elle ne mist l’entendement a oeuvre et les mains a la plume en compilant plusieurs tres nottables livres.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 723–724; *City*, 64.

⁷⁷In her *Vision*, for example, she writes about her own return to the pursuit of learning after the death of her husband, “Then, because of this solitude, there returned to me from the earlier days memorized passages of Latin and the languages of the noble sciences and various learned saying and polished bits of rhetoric that I had heard in the past when my dear, dead husband and father had been alive, notwithstanding that because of my folly, I retained little of it. For although naturally and from my birth I was inclined to this, my occupation with the tasks common to married women and the burden of frequent child-bearing had deprived me of it.”; “Adonc par solitude me vindrent au devant

Lady Reason treats the figures of Proba and Sappho similarly to how she had treated Cornificia, remarking on their outstanding skill and learning, as well as the depth of their understanding of the subject matters with which they concerned themselves.⁷⁸ Reason (and thereby Christine) does not limit herself to poets and philosophers to showcase the intellectual capacity of women, however; she also includes practitioners of the magical arts, such as Manto and Medea. Having first praised Manto's knowledge of divination as an art, she continues writing of Medea,

Medea, whom many historical works mention, was no less familiar with science and art than Manto. She was the daughter of Aetes, king of Colchis and of Persa, and was very beautiful, with a noble and upright heart and a pleasant face. In learning, however, 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. With her spells she knew how to make the air become cloudy or dark, how to move winds from the grottoes and caverns of the earth, and how to provoke other storms in the air, as well as how to stop the flow of rivers, confect

les rumigacions du latin et des parleurs des belles sciences et diverses sentences et polie rethorique que ouy le temps passé au vivant de mes amis trespassez, pere et mary, je avoie de eulx, non obstant que par ma fouleur petit en retenisse. Car, non obstant que naturellement et de nativité y fusse encline, me tolloit y vaquier l'occupation des affaires que ont communement les marices et aussi la charge de souvent porter enfans." de Pizan, *l'Advision*, 107–108; *Vision*, 102.

⁷⁸For Proba's story, (another fascinating example of translation and compilationary practice) see Christine de Pizan, *City*, 66. Of Sappho, Lady Reason says, "From what Boccaccio says about her, it should be inferred that the profundity of both her understanding and of her learned books can only be known and understood by men of great perception and learning, according to the testimony of the ancients. Her writings and poems have survived to this day, most remarkably constructed and composed, and they serve as illumination and models of consummate poetic craft and composition to those who have come afterward.": "Par ces choses que Bocace dist d'elle doit estre entendu la parfondeur de son entendement et les livres qu'elle fist de sy parfunde science que les sentences en sont fortes a savoir et entendre meismes aux hommes de grant engin et estude, selonc le tesmoing des anciens. Et jusques aujourd'uy durent encores ses escrips et dittiez, moult nottablement faiz et composez qui sont lumiere et exemple a ceulx qui sont venus après de parfaitement dicter et faire." de Pizan, *Cité*, 729; *City*, 67–68.

poisons, create fire to burn up effortlessly whatever object she chose, and all such similar arts.⁷⁹

This too goes directly and explicitly against her source Boccaccio, who calls Manto's practice "diabolical" and condemns her for her "wicked arts."⁸⁰ As for Medea, to say that Christine has to significantly revise her story in order to include Medea in her city of virtuous women is an understatement. To redeem Medea, she practically inverts the story, since Boccaccio begins his story of Medea by saying, "Medea, the most cruel example of ancient wickedness... was quite beautiful and by far the best trained woman in evil-doing."⁸¹ Boccaccio's more traditionally told Medea dismembers her baby brother and murders her own two children. With Christine's Medea, no mention is made of these murders or any of the other atrocious acts attributed to her.⁸² Furthermore, it is exactly the

⁷⁹"Medee, de laquelle assez d'istories font mencion, ne sceut pas moins d'art et de science que celle devant ditte. Elle fu fille de Othés, roy de Colcos, et de Perse, moult belle, de corsage haulte et droite et assez plaisant de viaire. Mais de sçavoir elle passa et exceda toutes femmes: elle savoit de toutes herbes les vertus et tous les enchantemens que faire se pevent; et de nulle art qui est[re] puis[t] sceu, elle n'estoit ignorente. Elle faisoit, par vertu d'une chançon qu'elle savoit, troubler et obscurcir l'air, mouvoir les vens des fosses et cavernes de la terre, commouvoir les tempestes en l'air, arrester les fleuves, confire poysons, composer feux sans labour pour ardoir quelconques chose qu'elle vouloit, et toutes semblables choses savoit faire." de Pizan, *Cité*, 732–733; *City*, 69.

⁸⁰See Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 60. For Christine's account, see Christine de Pizan, *City*, 69. For a look at how magic was perceived in the middle ages, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Canto Imprint, 2000), particularly the Chaps. 4 and 5, "The Common Tradition of Medieval Magic" and "The Romance of Magic in Courtly Culture," 56–94 and 95–113.

⁸¹Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 35.

⁸²Oddly enough, as part of his discussion of enthymemes in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle himself gives an example of one storyteller who presents Medea as being innocent, though accused, of murdering her two children (see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1400b 8–15.) It is possible Christine read that section of the *Rhetoric*, though we cannot be sure; in Christine's *Book of Peace*, she cites a passage that she identifies as being from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, however the translators note that particular citation is wrongly attributed. It comes not from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* but from pseudo-Cicero's *Rhetoric ad Herennium*. See Christine de Pizan, *Book of Peace*, ed. Karen Green, Constant Mews, and Janice Pinder (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 144 no. 73.

things which Boccaccio condemns—Medea's herbalism and magic arts—that Christine singles out for praise.⁸³

Christine continues her revaluing of the lives and work of women using the stories of other female figures. Arguing for the immense contribution women have made to human civilization, she attributes to various women the societal acquisition of such inventions as law,⁸⁴ iron and steel armor-making and shearing sheep to make wool cloth,⁸⁵ farming, bread-baking, and city-building,⁸⁶ wool-dyeing, tapestry-creation, and linen-making,⁸⁷ and silk cloth production,⁸⁸ among others. All of these and more, she argues, have brought a wealth of good to societies. Furthermore, several of these are, at least in some places, traditionally "feminine activities" which she here valorizes, reminding her readers that such activities provide society with a great deal of resources and comfort.

Having heard the inventory of all these goods for which women are responsible, Christine-the-narrator may finally respond to Lady Reason with a properly corrected idea of women, assenting that,

⁸³Boccaccio writes, "No matter by what teacher she was taught, the properties of herbs were so familiar to her that no one ever knew them better. By intoning enchantments, she knew perfectly how to disturb the sky, gather the winds from their dens, cause tempests, hold back rivers, brew poisons, make artificial fires for all kinds of conflagrations and all other things of this sort. Far worse, her soul was not in discord with her arts, for, if those failed, she thought it very easy to use steel." Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 35.

⁸⁴See the story of Carmentis; de Pizan, *City*, 71–73. This, of course, further complicates her apparent indication earlier that women should not be involved in the legal profession.

⁸⁵Both the invention of the art of armoring and of wool production/weaving are here attributed to the same individual. See the story of Minerva; *City*, 73–75. On the subject of Minerva having invented the techniques for armor-making, Christine (through the voice of Lady Reason) is particularly biting: "But what will all the many nobles and knights say, who generally slander women with such false remarks? From now on let them keep their mouths shut and remember that the customs of bearing arms, of dividing armies into battalions, and of fighting in ordered ranks—a vocation upon which they so pride themselves and for which they consider themselves so great—came to them from a woman."; "Mais que dirent les nobles et les chevaliers dont tant y a, et c'est chose contre droit, qui mesdient si généralement de toutes femmes? Refraignent leur bouche d'or en avant, advisant que le usaige des armes porter, faire batailles et combatre en ordenance, duquel mestier tant s'alousent et tiennent grans, leur est venu et donné d'une femme." de Pizan, *Cité*, 751–52; *City*, 80.

⁸⁶See the story of Ceres; de Pizan, *City*, 75–76.

⁸⁷See the story of Arachne; *ibid.*, 81–82.

⁸⁸See the story of Pamphile; *ibid.*, 83.

neither in the teaching of Aristotle, which has been of great profit to human intelligence and which is so highly esteemed and with good reason, nor in that of all the other philosophers who have ever lived, could an equal benefit for the world be found as that which has been accrued and still accrues through the works accomplished by virtue of the knowledge possessed by these ladies.⁸⁹

Through her dialogue with Lady Reason, Christine-the-narrator is able to revise her previous opinion. She may now argue that women have contributed more to human flourishing than any of those male scholars and philosophers whose written works had earlier brought her to the point of despair and self-hatred. Her renewed appreciation of her sex is due to the textual difference she has created from her authoritative sources—which were also the source of her troubles.

As is clear by now, Christine's re-presentations of Boccaccio's stories represent the production of new, different meaning crafted from an "old" text: a practice known as *inventio*.⁹⁰ It is important, however, to still see this "discovery" in terms of "production of meaning" gained through the rhetorical/hermeneutical tools previously mentioned. Abbreviating and amplifying, also sometimes referred to as *brevitas* and *copia*, are two of the principal modes of *inventio*.⁹¹ The text produced

⁸⁹"la doctrine d'Aristote, qui moult a prouffité a l'engin humain et dont on tient sy grant compte et a bon droit, ne de tous les autres phillosophes qui oncques furent, n'est point de pareil prouffit au siecle comme ont esté, et sont, les oeuvres faites par le sçavoir des dites dames." de Pizan, *Cité*, 752; *City*, 81.

⁹⁰For Copeland, *inventio* was a "fundamental procedure" of rhetoric. Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 2. But *inventio*, as she outlines its use by the ancients did not necessarily mean the creation of something entirely new. Rather, it was linked with logical inquiry, and with "discovering" meaning within the text. Copeland states, "In ancient rhetoric, invention is the discovery of a plausible and persuasive argument through a system of proofs. *Inventio* (Greek *heuresis*) literally means a 'coming upon,' a discovery of that which is there, or already there, to be discovered. The term has little to do with originality or with creation *ex nihilo*... From Aristotle onwards, the task of finding something to say is constituted mainly through a system of logical inquiry." *Ibid.*, 151.

⁹¹Mary Carruthers, dealing with "some core concepts of traditional rhetoric," writes, "They include the qualities known as *brevitas* and *copia*, which in ancient rhetoric were usually analyzed under style, but in monastic rhetoric develop self-consciously into tropes of invention. When rhetoric was taught again as a school subject after the late eleventh century, they turned up (in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, for example) as the related tropes of 'abbreviation' and 'amplification' judged to be essential for composing literary work." Carruthers, *Craft*, 61.

by Christine and the meaning she gives it do not come out of nowhere. Rather, what is "discovered" and then created through the use of *inven-tio* is precisely what constitutes the relevance of the source text in the new context.

The next large issue for Christine to tackle in her redefinition of women is the one with which she opened the book: women's supposed vice-ridden nature. Here, Lady Rectitude takes over. She rejects the claims of inherent female inconstancy and wickedness that were raised earlier by authors such as Mathéolus. Rectitude's stories recount women who risked everything to remain faithful and loyal to their partners. Whether by tales of women who remained beside their spouses even when they were found to have leprosy,⁹² or who followed their husbands into exile,⁹³ or who managed to keep important secrets despite all bribery or torture,⁹⁴ Christine, through the mouth of Rectitude, presents example after example of women who remained steadfast to both lovers and friends.

Having secured through quantity a basis of stories of female fortitude, Lady Rectitude embarks on several much longer narratives of female constancy and virtue in the face of truly despicable behavior on the part of the particular men with whom they are contrasted. These stories are calculated, one can only presume, both to dispel even the harshest accusations of feminine fickleness and to excite moral indignation on the part of the reader toward the specific men the text depicts, who act as counter-examples to the general claims the earlier misogynist texts made about male virtue and female vice.

One need look no further than the story of Griselda, a peasant chosen by a marquis to be his wife. In this particular narrative, the marquis decides to put Griselda through a series of increasingly harsh tests to check the constancy and submission of his wife of lower estate. He takes her children away and pretends to have them killed, strips her of her station to send her home all but naked, and then even demands she come back to plan the wedding for his *next* bride. Griselda remains

⁹²See de Pizan, *City*, 132.

⁹³See for example the stories of Queen Hypsicratea and Sulpitia. *Ibid.*, 120–122 and 132 respectively.

⁹⁴See for example the stories of Curia and the woman who protected the identity of the conspirators against Nero: *ibid.*, 135–137.

faithful and obedient throughout all these tests and finally has her children, and her position as the marquis' wife, restored to her.⁹⁵ While one seriously doubts the desirability or wisdom of returning to the side of such a spouse, the story, and others like it, accomplishes Christine's goal of showing the seemingly infinite ability of particular women to be faithful in all circumstances. We must not miss the point of moral indignation that is present in Christine's text, however—especially following, as it does, on the examples of other extremely bad men which Christine has inserted into the text directly before Griselda's tale. Lady Rectitude has just finished detailing to Christine-the-narrator numerous atrocities perpetrated by such men as Claudius, Nero, Galba, other emperors, and even various popes and churchmen, whose specific names she rather prudently leaves out. Of emperor Tiberius, for example, she asks, "Were not inconstancy, fickleness, and lust more clearly apparent in him than in any woman, whatsoever?"⁹⁶ Again, we are dealing with textual difference: this time the difference between the false accusations leveled against women—part of the source material with which Christine works—and the "real" behavior of men and women as portrayed in the stories Rectitude retells.

On the whole, one must recognize that this extended narrative and the stories around it are a reversal of the charges brought earlier against women. Here instead, it is specific men who are shown as "the vessel as well as the refuge and abode of every evil and vice,"⁹⁷ and specific women who are capable of withstanding incredible temptation

⁹⁵See *ibid.*, 170–176.

⁹⁶"Toute inconstance, toute varieté, tout lubrieté n'estoit elle en luy plus qu'il n'est trouvé de nulle femme?" and of the Church Rectitude states, "Let me also tell you about the popes and churchmen, who must be more perfect and more elect than other people. But whereas in the early Church they were holy, ever since Constantine endowed the Church with large revenues and riches, the holiness there! You have only to read through their histories and chronicles."; "Et pareillement je te dis des pappes et des gens de sainte Eglise, qui plus que autre gent doivent estre parfaits et esleuz. Mais quoyque au commencement de la christienté fussent sains, depuis que Constantin ot douee l'eglise de grans revenues et de richescs, la sainté quy y est... ne fault que lire en leurs gestes et croniques." de Pizan, *Cité*, 894 and 898 (ellipsis in text); *City* 166 and 169, respectively.

⁹⁷These are the words Christine applies in despair to women at the beginning of the book, see de Pizan, *City*, 5.

and being filled with outstanding virtue. It is important to remember, though, that in the vast majority of her other works, Christine spends a great deal of time detailing numerous examples of virtuous men, so she is hardly attempting to start or encourage a gender-war here. Rather, she is responding by reversal to charges she feels have been brought unfairly against women. It is worth noting additionally that both men and women would likely have read her book. Perhaps this is a way of implicitly asking her audience—whether male or female—to look at the worth of making general statements about a particular sex based on the worst stories of behavior within that sex. The behavior of Nero, for instance, hardly represents the behavior of the majority of men any more than the behavior of a sadistic and violent woman would represent the behavior of the majority of women. Rather, she has implied here, one should be measured by one's *actions*, not one's gender. This reading is all the more convincing since she offers examples of the actions of specific men and specific women rather than arguing, for example, that there are characteristics endemic to either men or women as a category.

There are many more stories Christine narrates in the sections of the *City* I have covered here, and I have not even touched on Christine's interactions with Lady Justice, whose grisly tales of the Virgin Martyrs show not only feminine constancy and virtue but also (oddly) feminine power. As Justice tells it, the various martyrs she highlights literally laugh in the face of their tormentors—one of them even spits out the piece of her tongue they had just hacked off her so forcefully that it puts out her torturer's eye.⁹⁸ One could get lost in the sheer numbers of stories Christine lays out in her redefinition—and, in fact, she wants you to. The copious nature of tale after tale of virtuous, powerful, wise, and resourceful women is meant to overpower her reader just as she had reported that the weight of the earlier tradition had overpowered her. We are meant to be bowled over, to experience the weight of this new history of women and its more appropriate words regarding women.

⁹⁸This is actually from the story of a martyr who shares Christine's name, and on whose story Christine spends a great deal of time. For the spitting out her tongue story, see de Pizan, *City*, 239. I am currently developing an essay on Christine's use of the Virgin Martyrs.

2.5 INVENTION OF *INTEGUMENTA*: THE STRANGE CASE OF SEMIRAMIS

I have now traced how Christine, following contemporary scholarly practices of translation and compilation, uses *divisio*, *abbreviatio*, *amplification*, and *inventio*, to discover, order, and thereby create new meaning out of the authoritative texts with which she worked. Next, I will turn to Christine's practice of writing *integumenta*. We will begin again with the *City of Ladies*, examining one of its particularly important figures (Semiramis) to explore the self-consciousness with which Christine makes use of *integumenta* before moving to her complex, philosophically transformative narrative interactions with Aristotelian tenets in the opening scene of her *Vision*.

Up until now, we have examined stories of women whom Christine presented as displaying obvious and exemplary virtue (even when she had to rewrite some of those stories to ensure their virtue). Now we will look at the tale of a woman who falls outside the traditional and clear notions of moral exemplarity with which Christine worked in the *City*. Such a woman seems problematic, for when the three goddess figures Reason, Rectitude, and Justice appear in Christine's study at the opening of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, they bring with them a task: to build a literary city that will be for "women worthy of praise."⁹⁹ What place, then, does a morally questionable woman have in the *City*?

The place this woman occupies is quite surprising. Having spent some time early in her work "clearing the field" on which to build her literary city, Christine-the-narrator is directed by Lady Reason to procure as her "first stone" the infamous figure of Semiramis—a powerful ancient queen known for strength, city building, martial capability, and sexual misconduct. Before covering her questionable traits, however, Christine chooses to dwell upon Semiramis' less worrisome characteristics, that is, her strength and martial prowess. As with other examples we have covered, she sets up the ancient queen as not only equaling but surpassing men at many of those qualities often associated (particularly in Christine's milieu) with men.¹⁰⁰ It seems at first reasonable,

⁹⁹"femmes dignes de loz" de Pizan, *Cité*, 630; *City*, 11.

¹⁰⁰Christine writes "she [Semiramis] undertook and accomplished so many notable works that no man could surpass her in vigor and strength."; "Si, et en tel maniere, exercita et acompli tant de notables oeuvres que nul homme en vigueur et force ne la surmonta." de Pizan, *Cité*, 678; *City*, 39.

then, to chose her as the first stone for the *City*. What could be better for Christine's project than a woman whom, as the text puts it, no man could outdo? And yet the story continues.

Not content to simply extol her strength, Christine details Semiramis' ability to conquer, having Lady Reason tell Christine-the-narrator, "she was so feared and revered in arms that, finally, she not only controlled the lands already in her power... in brief, she had soon conquered the entire Orient and placed it under her rule."¹⁰¹ Reason insists that in addition to being a competent and highly successful military commander, Semiramis was also an apt builder of cities who strengthened and rebuilt the great city of Babylon, after which "[t]his queen founded and built several new cities and fortifications and performed many other outstanding deeds and accomplished so much that greater courage and more marvelous and memorable deeds have never been recorded about any man."¹⁰² As with the examples I covered previously, we can see the recurring theme that the woman in question transcends any male model other authors could provide as comparison.

And yet the tale here does not have quite the same tone as the rest of the exemplary women Christine discusses. Whereas most of the other queenly exemplars Christine covers rule by wisdom,¹⁰³ even if they initially conquer or defend their lands by brute force, Semiramis not only conquers but rules with an iron first. She is certainly no Zenobia. Nowhere in the entire account does Christine mention any words associated with wisdom or learning. Since Christine focuses largely on Semiramis' ability to crush challenges to her power, one is left with the impression that Semiramis relies more on her brute strength and martial daring than on any more traditionally intellectual qualities or skillful government. As example, Reason tells the story of how Semiramis learned of a revolt while she was having her hair done, whereupon she immediately

¹⁰¹"par quoy elle fu tant craintee et doubttee en armes que... a brief parler, aucques tout Orient conquist et mist a sa subjeccion." de Pizan, *Cité*, 678; *City*, 39.

¹⁰²"Ceste royne fonda et ediffia de nouvel plusieurs cités et fortes places, et parfist plusieurs autres grans faiz, et acompli tant, que de nul homme n'est point escript plus grant couraige ne plus de faiz merueilleux et dignes de memoire." de Pizan, *Cité*, 680; *City*, 40.

¹⁰³Even Queen Fredegund, whom Christine calls "cruel, contrary to the natural disposition of women" is noted for her "wise government," whereas Semiramis is noted first and almost exclusively for her conquering and control. For Fredegund's story, see de Pizan, *City*, 33–34 and again 59–60.

and impulsively flies out the door and amasses an army to suppress this revolt, vowing she will not allow the second half of her head to be braided until she has restored her kingdom and ended the rebellion. This she quickly accomplishes. Reason ends the narration of that incident with the image of a statue raised in Semiramis' honor:

She had her massed troops quickly armed and advanced on the rebels and, thanks to great force and strength, brought them back under her authority. She so frightened these rebels and all her other subjects that ever after no one dared revolt. A large and richly gilt cast-bronze statue on a high pillar in Babylon which portrayed a princess holding a sword, with one side of her hair braided, the other not, bore witness to this noble and courageous deed for a long time.¹⁰⁴

Notice here that the emphasis is on the fear that Semiramis instills not only in those unfortunate subjects who revolted but also in *all her other subjects*, an emphasis further cemented by their erection of a witness to the deed: the statue of the half-braided princess holding a sword. Clearly, one did not wish to upset this woman, and Christine again leaves out the ending Boccaccio supplies, whereby Semiramis “gets her due” and is murdered by her own angry son.¹⁰⁵ Christine’s Semiramis remains alive and vibrant at the end of her account, and Christine focuses on her as a decisive, strong ruler with the ability to set order when and where she wished, whether through city-building, land-conquering, or revolt-suppressing.¹⁰⁶ Certainly, for these things, and Christine’s assertion that she

¹⁰⁴“Si fist prestement armer ses gens en grant multitude et ala sus les rebelles et par merueilleuse force et vigueur les remist en sa subjeccion. Et tellement espoventa yeuclx et tous les autres subgiez que oncques puis ne s’osa pié rebeller. Duquel fait tant noble et courageux par longtemps donna tesmoingnaige une grande statue d’une ymaige faite d’arain, doré richement, eslevé sus un hault piller en [?]biloine qui representoit une princepe tenant une espee, et ot l’un des costez de son chief trecié et l’autre non.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 679; *City*, 39–40.

¹⁰⁵See Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 7.

¹⁰⁶Although one may not see those activities as necessarily good or virtuous today, it is important to remember that Christine lived in a France that was increasingly under the threat of civil war, which she understood to be the cause of all manner of pain, suffering, and calamity for all people, from peasant to king. There has been considerable scholarly discussion of Christine’s views on revolt: for criticism of Christine’s views, see Sheila Delany’s article “Mothers to Think Back Through,” reprinted in *Selected Writings*, 312–328. For a response to Delany’s criticisms, see for instance Earl Jeffrey Richard’s essay “Conventions of Courtly Diction” in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, 250–271, especially 263–268,

had a “great and noble heart and so deeply loved honor,”¹⁰⁷ Semiramis would qualify as an exemplary queenly model for Christine’s city even if she makes modern audiences (and also medieval ones, who were almost universal in their condemnation of her) nervous about her totalitarian tendencies. But what of her role as mother, which Christine also mentions and which receives even more condemnation from most sources?

There is another side to Semiramis’ story, specifically her actions as a mother, which Christine also outlines for her readers: “It is quite true that many people reproach her—and if she had lived under our law, rightfully so—because she took as husband a son she had with Ninus her lord.”¹⁰⁸ Christine, however, excuses this incest, saying Semiramis would have understood such an action as necessary for the maintenance of her kingdom—since if her son married there would be another woman who would be queen instead of her—and because he would have been the only man “worthy” of her.¹⁰⁹ Christine also alleges that at that time the people “lived according to the law of Nature, where all people were allowed to do whatever came into their hearts without sinning.”¹¹⁰

and Keiko Nowacka, “Reflections,” 81–97. In any case, as will become apparent momentarily, I do not believe she is using Semiramis as a direct exemplar to imitate.

¹⁰⁷“qu’elle avoit bien si grant et si hault courage et tant amoit honneur.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 680; *City*, 40.

¹⁰⁸“Bien est vray que plusieurs luy donnent blasme—et a bon droit luy fust donné se de nostre loy eust esté—de ce que elle prist a mary un filz qu’elle avoit eu de Ninus son seigneur.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 680; *City*, 40.

¹⁰⁹Christine writes, “elle ne vouloit mie qu’en son empire eust autre dame couronnee que elle, laquelle chose eust esté se son filz eust espousé autre dame.”; “she wanted no other crowned lady in her empire besides herself, which would have happened if her son had married another lady.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 680; *City*, 40.

¹¹⁰“ains vivoient les gens a loy de nature, ou il loisoit a chacun sans mesprendre de faire tout ce que le cuer luy apportoit” de Pizan, *Cité*, 680; *City*, 40. Christine notes, of course, that this is no longer the case, though she continues to claim that Semiramis did not sin, asserting “there can be no doubt that if she thought this was evil or that she would incur the slightest reproach, she would never have done this, since she had such a great and noble heart and so deeply loved honor.”; “n’est pas doubte, que se elle pensast que mal fust ou que aucun blasme luy en peust encourir, qu’elle avoit bien si grant et si hault courage et tant amoit honneur, que jamais ne le faist.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 680; *City*, 40. This bit about the law of Nature (rather than codified law) may well be a reference to the apostle Paul’s position that “sin is not taken into account where there is no law.” Romans 5:13b. Maureen Quilligan notes this “pre-law” insistence as well, though she cites Augustine’s *City of God* and not Paul, and draws on a Derridean understanding

The inclusion of this brutal warlord-queen and her incestuous relationship with her son as quite literally the first stone in the city built for exemplary and righteous women has, understandably, been met with not a little confusion and incredulity—though some scholars have suggested Semiramis is another example of reinterpreting a previous, and problematic, text.¹¹¹ Such a reinterpretation is one likely motivation, as we know that Christine is certainly not averse to reinterpreting the stories she gleans from her sources. Semiramis is only the first of many different stories she will reinterpret for her city, and we know she revised the actions of the Amazons and such figures as Medea even more heavily than she recasts Semiramis.¹¹²

Recasting problematic stories is not the only possible approach to Christine's Semiramis, however; some scholars see Semiramis as a means to shock, and to defy cultural norms.¹¹³ Although I do not necessarily

of what is "written" (and the violence it entails) in opposition to a supposed oral culture that she argues Semiramis represents for Christine. See Quilligan, *Allegory*, 79–80. While I agree with Quilligan that the *City of God* was a likely source for parts of Christine's *City of Ladies* (indeed, given the two titles, one cannot help but see parallels), I would hesitate to look at Christine's Semiramis through a Derridean lens—though Derrida would be an interesting interlocutor by which to approach a new retelling of Semiramis' story today.

¹¹¹Sarah Kay, for instance, approaches this startling story by placing it in the context of Augustine's portrayal of Semiramis in his *City of God*, which she compares to Christine's *City of Ladies*. In Kay's account, Christine is rewriting an *auctor's* (here Augustine's) story such that it is no longer a reprimand for women. Kay argues, "Augustine presents Semiramis as contemporary and antitype of Abraham... In his account, Semiramis's political and military achievements are shrunk so as to allow opprobrium for her incestuous union to take centre stage (whereas Abraham's was excused). For Christine, by contrast, Semiramis is the prototype of the female city-builder. Powerful at arms, effective in the conquest of territories, when she rebuilt Babylon she made it into a more formidable fortress than it had been before... Her sexual promiscuity is passed over in silence, and the incest excused much as Augustine excused Abraham's." Sarah Kay, "The Didactic Space: The City in Christine de Pizan, Augustine, and Irigaray" in *Text und Kultur: Mittelaltlicher Literatur 1150–1450*, ed. Ursula Peters (Stuttgart, 2001), 450.

¹¹²The Amazons, for instance, are not pictured as killing either the men they partner with or any male children they might have. Rather, they simply go and find partners in other lands and return the child to his father, should the resulting baby be male. See de Pizan, *City*, 41. For Boccaccio's telling of Amazon practices, see Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, 24.

¹¹³Maureen Quilligan is a good example of this perspective. In Quilligan's words, "Semiramis is the most startling case imaginable because she transgresses the taboo against active female desire, specifically by transgressing the taboo against sexual contact between

agree that Christine was primarily trying to go against social norms and conventions, I do believe the shocking nature of the story is key to its interpretation. Christine used this story of war-soaked incestuous motherhood to bring attention to certain aspects of her book. Why else pick such a controversial figure as a founding stone? Or, having picked her, why not perform the same sort of rewriting on her that Christine performed on the stories of the Amazons, or on Medea, both of whose rewritings centered on their morally questionable—really, nefarious—actions as mothers? Why then did she not simply tell her reader that the information about Semiramis' supposed incest was false, or leave it out entirely? And why retain the emphasis on conquering, against what she writes elsewhere as permissible reasons for warfare?¹¹⁴

The answer, I think, lies in medieval rhetorical theory in the form of the *integumentum*, and in practices surrounding the importance and use of memory. The word *integumentum* means covering or veil, and is often used to refer to a fictive “layer” a writer places or a reader perceives over some truth.¹¹⁵ Put briefly, an *integumentum* is a story, or sometimes a figure, that is used allegorically to mean something other, and typically more profound, than its literal surface suggests.¹¹⁶ By engaging in the production and explication of *integumenta* Christine implicitly sets

mother and son... As a rhetorical tactic, the move is shocking and brilliant.” Quilligan, *Allegory*, 84.

¹¹⁴One can find her list of permissible reasons in Christine's *Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, her treatise on military matters, which she wrote after the *City*. See Christine de Pizan, *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry* trans. Sumner Willard, ed. Charity Cannon Willard (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 16–18. It is clear that Semiramis' actions often do not fall under any of the categories Christine would list only a few years later as permissible.

¹¹⁵As Suzanne Akbari notes in her recent work on allegory, “Both the writer who performs *allegoresis* on a classical text and the reader who interprets an allegorical fiction extract the kernel of the truth from the husk, removing the veil or *integumentum* that conceals the meaning.” Suzanne Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*, 17.

¹¹⁶In his *Fabula*, Peter Dronke offers the following: “the terms *integumentum* and *involucrum* likewise come to be used as near-synonyms for ‘myth,’ but with special emphasis on the ‘inner’ meaning of the mythic narrative, which it is the philosopher's task to discover.” Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 5.

herself up in the realm of *allegoresis*, as a philosopher who exegetes stories to gain deeper truths.

Reading allegorically can also, however, be seen as an aid to memory.¹¹⁷ When reading the *City*, we already know that we are in the realm of fictive allegory, since it is a brilliant goddess-figure speaking the story of Semiramis to us. How then does one read Reason's assertion that Semiramis committed no wrong, for her time, when she took her son as husband—or, for that matter, when she contravened the rules of permissible war and ruled to conquer as much land as possible instead of wisely and justly governing the land she had? The answer is understood through the veil of the story itself: one reads it allegorically, *and* for the purpose of remembering.

To underscore my point, look, for example, at the work of Mary Carruthers, who wrote on practices surrounding memory in the Middle Ages. In her words, "Before a work can acquire meaning, before a mind can act on it, it must be made memorable, since memory provides the matter with which human intellect most directly works."¹¹⁸ More importantly, Carruthers makes this statement in the context of recounting an extremely violent and bloody story of the virtues personified slaying the various vices.¹¹⁹ She asserts that it is the very carnage, so brutally portrayed, that imprints the attendant lesson the author wishes to instill in the audience. The images are so shocking that they *force* the reader to remember, for the poor soul is simply unable to forget such horrific images. That Christine includes at the end of her narrative of Semiramis' own tale of conquest, and directly before her excuse of Semiramis' incest, the image of a statue of Semiramis and her half-braided hair, further strengthens my contention that she is using this story as a site for

¹¹⁷Suzanne Akbari argues this as well, writing that, as one of three "purposes" she identifies for allegorical writing, "allegory acts as an aid to memory and, by increasing the pleasure of reading, facilitates learning." Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*, 9.

¹¹⁸Carruthers, *Craft*, 144.

¹¹⁹She is recounting portions of the *Psychomachia* written by Prudentius. The passage Carruthers cites just before making her point about memory includes the virtue Sobriety brutally slashing and smashing the throat of the vice Luxuria, along with a graphic enough description of the ensuing carnage to turn the stomach of even the least squeamish reader. See Carruthers, *Craft*, 143–144. Interestingly, Christine was aware of the *Psychomachia*, though I am unsure whether she read all of it; she even gives a (non-violent) citation from it in her *Book of Peace*. See de Pizan, *Book of Peace*, 126.

memory. She even gave her reader an image upon which to attach their memory of Semiramis, in addition to the image of the "first stone" that Reason already gave as part of the larger story of the *City* itself.

That Semiramis is a morally ambiguous figure is not, I think, in question. She is *not* virtuous on the surface by the standards of readers in Christine's time or, indeed, our own. Rather, she openly contravenes would be considered basic moral action: do not commit incest with your child, do not wage unjust war. Christine is in part counting on her reader's shocked disagreement. Precisely for these reasons, we cannot forget Semiramis when we speak of Christine's stories of exemplary women. It is her integumental status that actually aids in her use as a memory image, on which Christine's readers will be able to draw as they begin to build their own understanding of women.

In fact, as we see in listening closely to Reason's speech when she sets up the story, Christine seems to try to tag this integumental property right away, even before she gets into the details of Semiramis' story, and right alongside images that are clearly meant to be mnemonic. Speaking to Christine-the-narrator, Reason says,

Now it is time that you lay down the heavy and sturdy stones for the foundation of the walls of the City of Ladies. Take the trowel of your pen and ready yourself to lay down bricks and to labor diligently, for you can see here a great and large stone which I want to place as the first in the first row of stones in the foundation of your City. I want you to know that Nature herself has foretold in the signs of the zodiac that it be placed and situated in this work. So I shall draw you back a little and I will throw it down for you.¹²⁰

The construction of buildings was a common mnemonic device, as Carruthers showed with regards to other medieval writers, and has already, in fact, been remarked upon regarding Christine's own use of

¹²⁰"Et des or est temps que tu assiees ens les grosses et fortes pierres des fondemens des murs de la Cité des Dames. Sy prens la truelle de ta plume et t'aprestes de fort maçonner et ouvrir par grant diligence. Car voycy une grande et large pierre que je vueil qui soit la premiere assise ou fondement de ta cité, et saiches que Nature propre la pourtray par les signes d'astrologie pour estre mise et alucee en ceste oeuvre. Si te tray un pou ariere et je la te gitteray jus." de Pizan, *Cité*, 676; *City*, 38.

the genre,¹²¹ so, using these images of architectural construction is indicating to the reader that they are being supplied with a mnemonic device in the form of the construction of a city. But Christine is also using Semiramis herself as a mnemonic device, since she lists exactly which stone Semiramis constitutes in that city (“the first”) and exactly where that stone belongs in the city’s construction (“in the first row”). In addition to being a memory image, and as a supportive vehicle of that device, Semiramis is also an *integumentum*. Reason tells Christine-the-narrator that she, Christine, will be the one laboring diligently to lay the foundation stones, yet Reason reserves the first stone—Semiramis—as one she will have to lay herself, without Christine’s persona’s help. In fact, she says she will “draw you back a little” in order that she may “throw it down for you.” Here Christine, as the writer, is trying to signal to her readers that the story they are about to hear must be read through the eyes and ears of Reason, and that the reader will have to “draw back” from the story: they will not be able to read it on its surface level in order to understand it properly.

Why was memory so important for Christine? As a writer of the late middle ages (and this was nothing new, but rather something developed over the previous thousand years), memory was seen as the “place”

¹²¹Citing Paul’s passage in 1st Corinthians 3:10–17, where Paul develops the imagery of being a master-builder where each person is the temple of God, Carruthers notes “this passage gave license to a virtual industry of exegetical architectural metaphors.” Although she also notes that Paul “uses his architectural metaphor as a trope for invention, not for storage,” she indicates that later it became common to use buildings one mentally shaped as a means for memory storage (Carruthers, *Craft*, 17, both citations). Discussing a passage from Hugh of St Victor that also talks about “diligently” laying polished stones in a foundation upon which one may build “walls” for one’s building, she says, “this passage recalls the Pauline text without ever mentioning it (a very common device for intertextual *memoria*). A student is to use the mental building he has laid out on the foundation of his ‘historical’ knowledge of the Bible—that is, of its ‘story’—as a structure in which to gather all the bits of his subsequent learning. Such mnemotechnically constructed ‘super-structures’ (a Pauline word) are useful not as devices for reproduction alone (*rote*) but as collecting and re-collection mechanisms with which to compose the designs of one’s own learning.” Carruthers, *Craft*, 20. Carruthers does not mention Christine’s *City*, but Betsy McCormick (for example) builds on Carruthers’ work, specifically linking Christine’s *City* to mnemonic practice: “Christine creates a mnemonic city that allows her to rewrite women’s history while simultaneously providing a new memorial space to house this revision.” Betsy McCormick, “Building the Ideal City: Female Memorial Praxis in Christine de Pizan’s *Cité des Dames*” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36:1 (2003), 152.

where ethical decisions were invented; its importance lay in its orientation toward present, and future, ethical action.¹²² One took the material that one had committed to memory and, using that material in new ways (much like a *compiler* would compile a new text with new meaning appropriate to a particular context), one should be able to come to ethically appropriate conclusions about what to do in one's own context. The texts and concepts committed to memory were the material with which one creatively constructed an ethically appropriate response to a situation.¹²³

Christine could have just used Semiramis as a mnemonic device and never mind whether she is virtuous or not, relying merely on the fact that because of her horrific behavior she is memorable enough to stick in a reader's mind. But Christine's use of the infamous queen is cleverer than this. Semiramis offers the dual purpose of being both unforgettable and clearly functioning as an integument: in hearing Semiramis' story, the reader should be compelled to look under the words for the meaning Reason has placed there, since it is so clear that the surface level is not where the exemplarity of this particular figure resides, *and* Reason assures us that Semiramis does belong in the city for virtuous women—that, in fact, Nature herself “foretold” this woman's inclusion. Surely no one would forget the placement of Semiramis as Christine's first stone—and in remembering they would (in theory) seek the meaning she held for women, the proverbial kernel under the husk.

What is that kernel? I would argue it is that we, as readers, are to imitate this infamous queen. We are not, of course, to imitate the narratological “facts” of her story: her waging of inappropriate war and her incestuous relationship with her son. That would be merely reading the surface, getting distracted by the husk before ever reaching the truth inside. Rather, we are to see the entire literary “field” as an area to be

¹²²In the words of Carruthers, “The matters memory presents are used to persuade and motivate, to create emotion and stir the will. And the ‘accuracy’ or ‘authenticity’ of these memories—their simulation of an actual past—is of far less importance (indeed it is hardly an issue at all) than their use to motivate the present and to affect the future. Though it is certainly a form of knowing, recollecting is also a matter of will, of being *moved*, pre-eminently a moral activity rather than what we think of as intellectual or rational.” Carruthers, *Craft*, 67–68. Emphasis in text.

¹²³I discuss this process at greater length in Chap. 4.

“conquered” with the pen of our minds and our memory.¹²⁴ As it was with Semiramis’ martial success, no text should be able to withstand the onslaught of reinterpretation that is necessary for including these authoritative texts, each a province of their own, in a reader’s mental kingdom. In this interpretation, every text that can be seen from where a reader stands in the literary tradition must be brought under her dominion or thrown away as useless. The walls and towers of the texts within which women were meant to be confined must be torn down and rebuilt, no longer as prisons, the meaning of those texts brought under the rulership of a strong, decisive, and capable reader, whose guiding power reconstructs and strengthens the pieces of the texts in her memory according to her purpose. That is, just as Semiramis did, each reader is meant to understand that we should rebuild and strengthen our own mental city, the habitation of our memory and learning, to our own reinterpreted specifications and *not* (in this case) the surface-level misogynist representations of women and relationships between men and women that the material of so many texts offered to Christine. Indeed, to follow Semiramis’ story and understand her function as a figure we are meant to imitate, her readers should grasp that we are to take as mental partners only those texts we deem worthy. It is only meaning and memory to which we as readers have ourselves given birth—from those authoritative texts, one remembers, since Semiramis’ son is a “legitimate” son of her husband the late king—that we are to allow to help rule the kingdoms we have thus created.¹²⁵

Understanding this, we may see that Christine’s excusing of Semiramis’ incest is itself a veil—it is the very offensive quality of the story on which Christine is drawing to ensure her audience will pay attention, look deeper within her words, and remember what they find there: the impetus to their own acts of creative reinterpretation of the

¹²⁴One recalls that it is in the paragraph directly previous to that in which Reason names Semiramis as the “first stone” that Reason insists that God has “ordained” that it is not just men who can be “solemn and valorous conquerors” but women as well, which Reason says she will give several examples of, Semiramis being the first. See de Pizan, *City*, 37–38.

¹²⁵I am not advocating that one always or even usually read in this way. In general, I think that being open to dialogue and approaching texts more hospitably, willing to place one’s opinions at risk, is better practice. However, in situations where one is in openly hostile textual ground, as Christine was, her integumental use of Semiramis outlines a potential way to “clear the field.”

literary tradition that shaped them into something *they* shape, crafting an inventive and protective mental “city” where they can live and learn. In Semiramis, the roles of memory image and *integumentum* coexist; it is precisely in the readerly act of understanding Semiramis as a memory image wherein is stored the meaning of an authoritative text, that the reader also perceives Semiramis in her role as *integumentum*. Furthermore, this is a moral imperative. The reader *should* reinterpret the stories that were previously read on the surface level. These reinterpreted stories are now meant instead to help readers (whether female or male) construct new moral identities for women as non-monstrous, *human*, ethical members of the community.

Lest this seem too far-fetched, I should note that Christine was hardly the first to use morally questionable stories to engender moral lessons. Scholar Peter Dronke, drawing on the work of William of Conches and of Macrobius, specifically makes the point that *integumenta* were not always easily identifiable as “moral” stories. On a literal level, some were very problematic, as we saw with the story of Semiramis. What was important to a story’s translated textual use was its internal meaning, not what one could read on the surface. Commenting on the work of William of Conches, who was commenting on Macrobius’ commentary on the dream of Scipio, Dronke writes,

for him [William] the seemliness of the *significatio* genuinely eclipses and renders unimportant the unseemliness of the words. Even if the language or the narrative details of a fictive work seem objectionable, the work can still be beautiful and honorable *because of what it means*. It is not the philosopher who makes an honest woman out of the wanton *fabula*: whatever her appearance, she can have a beauty and dignity that stem from her inherent nature, her meaning.¹²⁶

Christine’s practice falls well within such a conception, and Dronke notes how William opens up the use of far more types of story for the use of philosophy, significantly expanding on what Macrobius had approved.¹²⁷ Dronke shows how William builds his understanding of

¹²⁶Dronke, *Fabula*, 28. Emphasis in text.

¹²⁷Dronke writes William “is determined to re-admit the philosopher to every kind of *fabula*, to envisage the possibility of metaphorical reading in a far wider range of fictional material than Macrobius allowed.” Dronke, *Fabula*, 21.

human knowledge from a Platonic base, where “there is no possibility of two orders of cognition... for to him [Plato, according to William] the *imago* is no lesser thing, no *mere* effigy: it is the very condition of human knowledge.”¹²⁸

William’s view illuminates Christine’s precisely because, in her allegorical works, she too is largely concerned with the conditions of human knowledge—and with how that knowledge translates into human action, as we will see even more clearly in Chap. 4. This is why she supplies us with so many striking images, like that of the statue of Semiramis and her half-braided hair: she is exploiting a notion like William’s that we gain knowledge through images. In the *City*, she is trying to help her readers invent new knowledge about what “women” are and their ethical belonging in the community. Elsewhere, as we will see later in Chap. 4, that knowledge-toward-ethical action is more politically oriented and aimed specifically at attempting to convince the Powers of France to moral knowledge and action.

There is a significant difference between William’s and Christine’s thought on the usefulness of *integumenta*, however. While Dronke notes that William sees the veils *integumenta* provide as useful for “covering” knowledge that only a select portion of society is worthy of learning, Christine, though she occasionally references such theories, seems more concerned with bringing her audience to a point of understanding her *integumenta*, whether or not that audience could be deemed “worthy.”¹²⁹ She realized that if her work was to be successful—if she was to manage to change the course of the social and political interactions of her day—she would have to address the people who had the power to begin the social changes or undertake the specific political actions she thought were best, regardless of their intelligence or moral “worth.” This is why she takes so many pains to explain what her stories mean and how they should be read, even to the point of offering an introductory gloss on part of one of her most difficult texts.¹³⁰ This is true of her more politically inclined work as well, where she is trying to convince the princes of France or the queen to behave in particular (and, she deems,

¹²⁸Dronke, *Fabula*, 34.

¹²⁹I will discuss this in greater detail when I look at Christine’s allegorical work *The Path of Long Study*. See Chap. 4.

¹³⁰She does this for the first book of her *Vision*.

more ethical) ways. Were she to write her allegories only for those who were “worthy” of them, she would not be able to address all the individuals in power whom she needed to persuade.

In either case, however—in Christine’s practically focused writing as well as in William’s more esoteric work—one does not simply strip the veil off an *integumentum* to find what is “really” underneath. Rather, to use Suzanne Akbari’s phrase, one *sees through* the veil.¹³¹ The *integumentum* provides the reader with handles by which to grasp its material: it is the lens through which one is able to see what it at the same time covers. The two writers differ mainly in that Christine is insistent, for what she hopes to be socially and politically transformative reasons, that it is not just an intellectually elite readership who should be able to see—that is, understand—through her *integumenta*, but they both insist that it is through the *integumenta* that one comes to understanding.¹³² In Christine’s as well as William’s work, *integumenta* are modes of knowing.

Because *integumenta*, though distinct from what they are meant to show, function as modes of knowing, theories of *integumenta* can be very revealing of an author’s understanding of the power and purpose of allegory. To that end, Akbari makes an interesting comparison between the two authors of the *Roman de la Rose*, a work with which we know Christine was quite familiar,¹³³ and from which parallels can be drawn with Christine’s work. Akbari notes that when Guillaume de Lorris, the

¹³¹See her book *Seeing through the Veil*, from which I have learned a great deal. She has also written an article specifically on Christine’s allegorical practice. See “The Movement from Verse to Prose in the Allegories of Christine de Pizan” in *Poetry, Knowledge and Community in Late Medieval France*, ed. Rebecca Dixon and Finn Sinclair (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 136–148.

¹³²I say that Christine’s writings are not aimed at an intellectually elite readership, but this is not to say they are in any way egalitarian. They are merely aimed more widely—or at least differently—than William’s: firstly, at the politically and socially powerful, instead of the scholarly astute (though that is also not to say the two categories could not mix, nor that Christine would not have been delighted to have serious scholarly as well as political attention paid to her texts).

¹³³Christine debated the worth of the *Roman de la Rose* in an exchange of letters with various scholars shortly before she started writing the *City of Ladies*. For a full account of that debate, as well as the roots from which it came and where it went after Christine made it public, see Christine McWebb’s edited compilation *Debating the Roman de la Rose* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

first author of the *Roman*, writes his allegory using the *integumentum* of the rose and the lover, the lover never reaches the rose because the poem is an allegorical retelling of the Narcissus myth. As she puts it, “Like Alanus’ rose, but emphatically unlike Jean de Meun’s, Guillaume’s rose is not a real substance, but ‘forma rosae,’ the form of a rose.”¹³⁴ On the other hand, Akbari sees de Meun as following a different and opposing path. She reads his portion of the *Roman* as, in many senses, forsaking the goal and structure of an allegory in favor of the literal—exactly the opposite of what Christine meant in using a figure like Semiramis, where the literal reading must be eschewed in order to gain the inner meaning. Akbari points out that while Guillaume’s rosebud is still unattained at the end of his tale, de Meun’s rose is forcefully taken and possessed. Furthermore, de Meun jettisons many of the key elements of an allegory, even while supposedly composing one. His personifications, for example, behave in ways that break with previous literary practice as it had developed.¹³⁵ De Meun’s personifications are not bound by their representative function with respect to what they personified.

This is precisely one of Christine’s most vehement criticisms of de Meun’s text: that his personifications do not behave as they should.¹³⁶ In Christine’s work, the goddess-figures who appear within the text are personifications and *are* exactly who and what they say they are. They do not merely act their part; they embody it, and her work depends on

¹³⁴Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, 75.

¹³⁵Explaining Guillaume’s use of personification and noting its resonance with earlier practices before turning to de Meun’s different practice, she writes, “his [Guillaume’s] representation of Deduit shows his conformity to his twelfth-century models, where the personification is simultaneously person and abstraction, and the literal level that characterizes the person is subordinated to the figurative level that conveys the abstraction.” Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, 106–107.

¹³⁶We see this when Christine attacks Pierre Col for defending Jean de Meun’s Lady Reason, who at one point claims that it is better to deceive than to be deceived. Col tried to read the statement allegorically, but Christine denies that such a reading is possible. She replies, “You interpret wondrously that which is stated clearly and literally: ‘It is better, dear Master, to deceive than to be deceived.’... You wish he [de Meun] had never said it! You can say with certainty that Reason, daughter of God, never pronounced such a thing.” de Pizan, *Debating the Roman de la Rose*, 157, 159. Original French: “Et merveilles interpretes ce qui est dit clerement et a la lecture: ‘Il vault trop mieulx, biau maistre, decevoir que estre deceu.’... tu voulroyes bien qu’il ne l’eust oncques dit! Tu peus bien hardiement dire que oncques de Raison, fille de Dieu, n’yssi tel mot.” *Ibid.*, 156.

them doing so successfully. If they do not, her stories will not have the revelatory aspect that she desires for them. To put it another way, as a figure from history and *not* a personification, Semiramis can misbehave. Lady Reason, however, cannot. If Christine's personifications do not act as they ought—if, for example, Reason does not act reasonably—they will not be capable of teaching the reader the knowledge-toward-action that Christine wishes her reader to learn. They will in fact cease to be related to modes of knowing at all, and be simply characters.

It would be difficult to over-emphasize the importance of realizing that the narrative images Christine presents to us in her allegories are *ways of knowing*. Her texts are consciously ordered toward a reader's or listener's understanding. In fact, (ever the educator) she is trying to teach her readers how to *think*, deeply. It is no accident that Lady Reason is a major interlocutor or figure in so much of Christine's work. She wants her readers to actively reason: to reflect, question, interpret, and then act appropriately within their context. She is trying to teach them to invent meaning.

Of course, many of her audience would not be particularly adept at this sort of reading. This is why she spends so much time explicating her stories, glossing their meaning, repeating various stories in different contexts, and trying to get her readers to see how these stories could connect with their own lives. She, as the philosopher, provides the necessary gloss—but one cannot help but begin to suspect that she is trying to train her readers to become philosophers themselves. She wants them too to learn the tools necessary to give integumental glosses.

As we can see, Christine was well aware of the practice of creating *integumenta* to educate her readers. Often, she used this means to engage her readers on political topics, but she did not confine her use of *integumenta* to the political; she could not resist taking on some of the philosophers' opinions as well, when she had time and opportunity. In the next section, Sect. 2.6, I will discuss how Christine uses a fictionalized story to revise the work of even such an authoritative philosopher as Aristotle himself, whom she admits is “the prince of philosophers in whom both natural and moral philosophy attained their highest level.”¹³⁷ Building on a foundation she had laid in her *City of Ladies*,

¹³⁷ “[L]e prince des phillosophes et en qui phillosophie naturelle et morale fu souverainement.” de Pizan, *Cité*, 623; *City*, 7.

Christine makes use of *integumenta* in the opening of her *Vision*, where a significant aspect of her purpose is taking apart some of Aristotle's work on gender, using pieces of his own material to construct her creative understanding of human gender and generation. The *Vision* allows us to explore some of her more specifically philosophical fiction and provides insight into one of her most important allegorical figures, who will figure more significantly in Chap. 4 of this book: Lady Nature.

2.6 ARISTOTLE AND NATURE, NATURALLY

Although it is clear that she was familiar with several of Aristotle's works, Christine took up only some of his tenets on gender and generation of bodies. In particular, she made use of his belief that gender was an "accidental," not an essential attribute of human nature.¹³⁸ Conceptualizing gender thusly meant that it would be difficult to argue for a "natural" hierarchy between men and women. It does not preclude a social hierarchy, which Christine recognized as a part of her social order, but it places women and men on initially equal ground: both fully human, in body (though their bodies are different) and in soul. As Christine writes in the *City of Ladies*, "God created the soul and placed wholly similar souls, equally good and noble in the feminine and in the masculine bodies."¹³⁹

Such an understanding of gender in accidental terms differed significantly from the ways in which prevailing theories were used. In the *City of Ladies*, we recall, Christine-the-narrator tells us that after reading faulty misogynist books she became convinced that women were somehow "monstrous" creations of Nature gone wrong. It is this word, *monstrous*, and any other indications of women being somehow essentially deformed, which are key to interpreting Christine's use of the figure

¹³⁸For more discussion of Christine's handling of Aristotelian tenets of gender and generation, see, for instance, Earl Jeffrey Richard's 2003 essay "Destructive Glosses" where he examines Christine's use of the phrases *homme naturel* and *femme naturelle* in the context of their relation to Thomist/Aristotelian debates. "Somewhere between Destructive Glosses and Chaos" in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altman and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43–55. See also Rosalind Brown–Grant's take on Christine, Aristotle, and gender where she focuses on the positive things Christine is able to take from Aristotle on the topic of gender—namely, its accidental and non-essential quality: Brown-Grant, *Moral Defense*, 120–121. See also Allen, *Concept of Women*, 77–79, and her entire chapter on Christine: 606ff.

¹³⁹"Laquelle ame Dieu crea et mist aussi bonne, aussi noble et toute pareille en corps femenin comme ou masculin." de Pizan, *Cité*, 652; *City*, 23.

of Nature. Christine-the-narrator tells Lady Reason: "My lady, I recall that among other things, after he [the author of the *Secreta mulierum*] has discussed the impotence and weakness which cause the formation of a feminine body in the womb of the mother, he says that Nature is completely ashamed when she sees that she had formed such a body, as though it were something imperfect."¹⁴⁰ Lady Reason, of course, denies this charge, but it is inevitably to nature, and a discussion of nature/Nature, that Christine must turn if she wishes to most effectively counter the foundation of misogynist claims about women.

In fact, this is precisely what Christine undertakes in the opening scene of the *Vision*. There we are met with a peculiar dream Christine recounts wherein she witnesses the actions of Lady Nature's process for the generation of bodies. She describes how her spirit was flown into a shadowy valley where she sees two figures: a large male figure beautifully adorned and a large, crowned shadowy female figure, "the semblance of a powerful queen naturally fashioned without visible or tangible body."¹⁴¹ These two figures, which she names Chaos and Nature,¹⁴² are engaged in generating all the bodies in the world. As the means by which this is accomplished, Nature is pictured mixing materials to cook in Chaos' mouth in molds that she herself chooses.¹⁴³ The molds give

¹⁴⁰"Dame, il me souvient qu'entre les autres choses que il dist, quant il a assez parlé de l'impotence et foy/blesce qui est cause de fourmer le corps femenin ou ventre de la mere, que Nature est aussi comme toute honteuse quant elle voit que elle a fourmé tel corps si comme chose imparfaite." de Pizan, *Cité*, 650; *City*, 23. When Christine-the-narrator mentions the book *Secreta mulierum* from which, among other even more troubling things, she gleans the account of females being formed due to a defect or weakness during the process of generation, Lady Reason immediately pounces on the book and denies (correctly) that it was written by Aristotle. When she then demolishes its arguments, she is able to criticize what are, in part, Aristotelian tenets without directly calling out the "prince of philosophers" himself.

¹⁴¹"la semblance d'une tres poissant royne naturelment fourmee sans corps visible ne palpable." de Pizan, *l'Advision*, 13; *Vision*, 19.

¹⁴²Chaos she names in the narrative itself, while she names the female figure in her prologue. See de Pizan, *Vision*, 11.

¹⁴³Christine states, "She would put everything to cook and take form in the gigantic figure's mouth, which was so broad that it resembled a great oven, heated as a tempered bath might be. There she would leave them for the time which, according to the differences and weights of the molds, was most appropriate for each. After the time when the wise directress knew the moment for her work's perfection had arrived, she would open the giant's mouth so skillfully that she had room to withdraw the materials that were done;

form to the matter—composed of bile, honey, lead, and feathers—which comprise the bodies so cooked. Christine relates that her spirit too falls into the hands of Nature and is treated similarly, being placed in a mold which gave her resulting body the feminine sex.¹⁴⁴

Nature's dealings with Christine-the-narrator in this opening scene are the flashpoint illuminating her differences with Aristotle on the topic of gender. His belief that gender is an accidental quality and not an essential one is only part of his conception of gender: his work on generation "fleshes out" the rest of his theory. In Aristotle's conception of generation, the male is the only true actor, because only he is able to produce semen. Since the woman cannot produce any semen, she is marked by her supposed inability to properly generate (as with his contemporaries, Aristotle understood semen to be *the* generative principle).¹⁴⁵ This stated inability of women to generate is what the majority of misogynist authors were drawing on when they formulated their theories, and such a conception constitutes the bulk of what Christine is trying to combat when she undertakes her redefinition of the category of women. Thus, one sees that in Christine's "vision," the Aristotelian generative roles of man and woman are reversed. Here it is Nature, the female figure, who is clearly the active member in the conception and generation process while Chaos, the male partner, remains passive.¹⁴⁶

the others she would leave to cook until their time was up."; "Tout ce fait non d'une guise mais en diverses differences, mettoit tout cuire et confire en la gueule dudit grant ymage, qui tant estoit lee qu'elle representoit une grant fournoise chauffee en maniere d'atrempees estuves. La les laissoit jusques a temps convenable, l'un plus que l'autre, selon la difference et la grosseur des outilz. Après le temps venu que la saige administraresse savoit le terme de la perfection de son oeuvre, elle ouvroit la bouche de cel ymage par tel art qu'elle donnoit lieu de tirer hors les matieres assés cuites et les autres laissoit cuire jusques a l'accomplissement de leurs jours." de Pizan, *l'Advision*, 13; *Vision*, 19–20.

¹⁴⁴Christine stresses Nature's active choice in the matter instead of falling back on the mold itself. She says, "because she who had cast it wished it to be so rather than because of the mold, I was given the feminine sex."; "Mais comme le vouldist ainsi celle qui la destrempe avoit faite, a laquelle cause se tient et non au mole, j'aportay sexe femmenin." de Pizan, *l'Advision*, 14; *Vision*, 20.

¹⁴⁵See Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, bk IV.

¹⁴⁶Although Christine does not cite these authors in the *Vision* (and so it is impossible to say with certainty whether she had read them by the time she wrote it), it is possible that she is echoing authors such as Bernard Silvestris with his work *Cosmographia* and Alan of Lille's *Plaint of Nature*. Both of these authors envision a female Nature as an actor in generation. Barbara Newman discusses these works and the actions of Nature (Natura) within

Nature selects the materials and puts those materials into different molds, also of her choosing. She places the molds in Chaos' mouth and she is the one who knows when each mold is ready to come out. She is even the one who takes them out. In all this, Chaos, the male figure, is merely an "oven" to cook the materials and molds chosen and arranged by the female figure Nature. Once they are done, of course, he may then eat them, but carrying and eating them are the only tasks allotted him, beyond finally excreting them at the end of their life.¹⁴⁷

This is a long way from the understanding of conception and birth proposed by Aristotle, though it is important to remember that his views on generation are only half of his work on gender. For Aristotle, women are the passive receptacles of men's sexual action in the process of sexual generation.¹⁴⁸ It is only the sperm which have any generative qualities, though women carry the thusly generated baby in their wombs much as Chaos carries them in his mouth. It is possible that, when she has Chaos eating the newly formed bodies, Christine had in mind the image of Lucifer chewing on Judas, Brutus, and Cassius from canto XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*—but if that is the case, then Christine has inverted the image markedly. *Her* large male figure that eats people (Chaos) is not written as having been banished from heaven, as Lucifer was, and does not munch on only sinners of the worst repute. Instead, her figure finds

them: see *God and the Goddesses*, especially 55–73. Christine is unusual in her designation of matter being associated with the male figure, however.

¹⁴⁷“But an amazing thing would happen to them: for as soon as these tiny figures left their dies, then the large figure in whose mouth they had been cooked would greedily swallow them all into his belly in a single gulp. And thus neither night nor day would the work cease, continued at the hands of this lady for the nourishment of the great insatiable body.”; “Adont sailloient hors de ces moles petis corps de diverses façons selon les empreintes des instrumens. Mais merveilleuse aventure en avenoit: car, aussi tost que ces petiz ymages laissoient leurs moles, adont le grant ymage en quel gueule avoient esté cuis les transloutissoit tous vis en sa pance, sans nombre, a une goulee. Et ainsi nuit et jour ne cessoit cel ouvrage continué par les mains d'icelle dame pour la pasture du grant corps insaciable.” de Pizan, *l'Advison*, 13; *Vision*, 20.

¹⁴⁸I should give (dubious) credit where credit is due: this deplorable phrasing is in fact a quote from one of my (male) peers when I was a grad student in a course reading Augustine's *Confessions* alongside Derrida's *Circumfessions*. Apparently, Aristotelian concepts of generation and male sexual potency seen against supposed female passivity are still well entrenched in some places; he actually used this phrase unironically to describe heterosexual intercourse.

all humans rather delicious—though he does at least have the courtesy to swallow us whole and leave the chewing aside. In addition, we do not ultimately remain in Chaos’ mouth (or belly), as one assumes Dante expected Judas, Brutus, and Cassius would be required to do. When the time of our mortal life is finished, Chaos is apparently also finished digesting us, and excretes our souls from his other end. (There really is no polite way to say that.) The inspiration for this too may have come at least in part from Dante, since when his persona and Virgil his guide begin their climb first down, then up on the way out of hell, Dante mentions that he and Virgil come out and see Lucifer upside down with his lower half sticking out. They too thus leave *by* his lower half, though not quite *through* his lower half, as Christine’s earthier image depicts our own exit.¹⁴⁹

Truly, Christine had a sense of humor and could use it in her stories to challenge and transform her various source-authorities to create the conceptual difference necessary for her audience to understand that the conditions she is contesting are not the only conditions possible—in fact, that despite their authoritative Aristotealian source they might not even be an accurate account of generation and gender. She inverts the traditional association of women with matter and men with form, and does so through the use of these fictionalized figures and the veiled language of this dream. She even quips that this male figure who continually eats the formed bodies is “greedy” and “insatiable”—two charges that were often brought against women in misogynist texts, as the *City of Ladies* demonstrated.¹⁵⁰ With the vision Christine reports, we see that, contra Aristotle on generation, her gender was not the result of some imperfection or defect acting on nature, but rather the desire of Nature herself. This is in stark contrast to a Nature who is ashamed of feminine form, as Christine-the-narrator protested on the advice of certain *auctores* in the *City of Ladies*.¹⁵¹ One can see then how Christine works both with and

¹⁴⁹For this section of Dante’s story, see Canto XXXIV of his *Inferno*, lines 88–121. My thanks to my former supervisor Robert Sweetman for suggesting this possible textual resonance.

¹⁵⁰See for instance de Pizan, *City*, 25.

¹⁵¹As mentioned above. See de Pizan, *City*, 23. In addition, scholar Barbara Newman makes the same claim and relates it to Christine’s *Mutation of Fortune*: “Christine stresses the intentionality of Nature in assigning gender to bodies. [In the *Vision* as] in the *Mutation of Fortune*, she is born female because Lady Nature wills it so, not because of any defect or irregularity in the ‘mold.’ Here Christine implicitly rejects the Aristotelian view of

against writers such as Aristotle, appropriating one level of meaning in the text—which allows her to see gender as an “accident,” a non-essential trait—and rejecting what she has divided out into a separate piece she will revise: his devaluation of women’s bodies as imperfect or deformed.

Christine’s interactions with Aristotelian tenets through the figure of Nature is important since it allows her to see the human species as two parts of the same whole, a lesson she cleverly presents to her reader by veiled means. Any person, by her integumental account, is first and foremost *human* and only secondarily female or male. It is a move aimed at normalizing relations between the sexes and proving that women are every bit as human as men, not some lower form of animal—serpents, beasts, or monsters, as some texts portrayed them.¹⁵² This is not to say that Christine does not portray certain people as serpents, beasts, and monsters. She does. When she does so, however, it is due to their *actions*, speaking of such individuals as having been “transformed;” they are not what they were intended to be.¹⁵³

women as deficient males, an idea sanctioned by Thomas Aquinas and refuted by Reason in *The City of Ladies*.” Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 121. Brackets mine. Newman cites here the same passage I cited above from the *City*.

¹⁵²See, in particular, Helen Solterer, *The Master and Minerva: Disputing Women in French Medieval Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Speaking in this case about Richard de Fournival’s thirteenth-century work *Bestiaire d’amour*, she writes, “The master’s letter to a woman reader involves various lessons concerning animals that, given this implicit conception of women, are meant to be adopted easily by her. The presumption is that one beast should recognize another. By reading the master’s commentary on the hedgehog or the crocodile, she should identify so completely with these animals that she should defer immediately to his erudition. As a result, not only is he meant to gain control over her, but his theorem on women’s animalistic nature should be reinforced as well.” Solterer, *The Master and Minerva*, 82. Solterer also has an entire chapter devoted to Christine in her book, mostly covering the *Querelle de la Rose* and Christine’s *Path of Long Learning*. See *ibid.*, 151–175.

¹⁵³Her letter, “Lamentation on the Evils of the Civil War,” written in 1410 in the face of dire political upheaval, works extensively with the metaphor of humans turned into animals. There, for example, she scathingly writes, “Oh, how can it be that the human heart, as strange as Fortune is, can make man revert to the nature of a voracious and cruel beast? Where is reason which gives him the name of rational animal? How can Fortune have the power to transform man so much, that he is changed into a serpent, the enemy of humankind? Oh, alas, here is the reason why, noble French princes[!];” “O! Comment est-il en la puissance de Fortune que cuer humain, tant soit la Fortune estrange, si puist ramener homme a nature de très devorable et cruelle beste? Ou est doncques la raison qui li donne le non de animal raisonnable? Comment est-il en la puissance de Fortune de

A pattern is becoming apparent here. Christine is using stories and fictive figures to invent difference from her present context. We have seen she has used *allegoresis*, the practice of reading allegorically, as a philosophical tool by which to exegete the stories she presents as a means to deeper truths. We have even seen how she purposefully wrote these stories, as well as many of the images within them and within her other less narrative works, to be *memorable*: to be aids for her reader to more readily recall the deeper truths her allegorical readings uncover. She is trying to create new meaning out of her compiled textual matter, meaning aimed at the particular areas of social transformation that she desires.

We have spoken of the ethical orientation toward action that Christine attempts to inculcate in her audience, and such an exploration will continue in Chap. 4. First, however, having laid out Christine's tools, I will now take an interlude and move forward six hundred years to the work of Luce Irigaray. In her writing, we will see a philosopher contemporary to our own time who is engaged in similar practices, even as her desired results differ significantly from those of Christine. As we will see, Irigaray's pattern of creating textual difference to discover new possibilities is also aimed at ways of knowing meant to encourage acting (and, for Irigaray, relating) by means of particular modes of ethically inscribed understanding. Let us continue our journey.

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telement transmuer homme, que convertiz soit en serpent, ennemi de nature humaine? O las! Veez-cy de quoy, nobles princes françois!" Christine de Pizan, "Lament on the Evils of the Civil War" in *The Epistle of the Prison of Human Life with An Epistle to the Queen of France and Lament on the Evils of the Civil War*, ed. and trans. Josette A. Wisman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1984), 84 French; 85 English translation.

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