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CONFERENCIAS

**Excavating Misogyny and Building on Women's History: Christine de Pisan's *Book of the City of Ladies* as a model for academic feminist theology**

SARA PARVIS

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*El pasado mes de marzo 2020, Xavier Morales y Samuel Fernández, profesores de patología de nuestra Facultad, invitaron a la Prof.<sup>a</sup> Sara Parvis, Senior Lecturer in Patristics de la Escuela de Teología de la Universidad de Edinburgo en el marco del proyecto Fondecyt Regular 2019 N° 1190035: "El 'modalismo' en la teología trinitaria de la edad patristica: estudio histórico y propuesta de un paradigma interpretativo renovado".*

*La Prof.<sup>a</sup> Sara Parvis es especialista de la historia de la Iglesia antigua, y autora de Marcellus of Ancyra and the Lost Years of the Arian Controversy, 325-245, Oxford, 2006. Actualmente, prepara una edición crítica de los fragmentos de Marcelo de Ancira y la publicación de un libro sobre el Concilio de Constantinopla de 381.*

*La estadía de la profesora invitada estuvo marcada por la rápida multiplicación de casos de contagio por el Covid-2019, lo que impidió que se diera la conferencia que ella había propuesto dirigir a los miembros de nuestra Facultad. Publicamos a continuación el texto de esa conferencia, que respondía a una de las temáticas que la Facultad decidió destacar en este año 2020: "Excavando misoginia y construyendo una historia de mujeres: el Libro de la ciudad de las damas como modelo para la teología académica feminista".*

*Se puede además escuchar una entrevista a la profesora Sara Parvis en <https://youtu.be/dO6f7Xuuo6U>*

In preparing for this lecture, I asked various feminist friends 'When you first learned about feminist history, who did you learn was the first woman to identify and confront misogyny, or some aspect of misogyny, as a system?' Most named twentieth-century writers such as Simone de Beauvoir or Germaine Greer; with one or two exceptions, the earliest writer who tended to be mentioned was Mary Wollstonecraft, who in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* of 1792 took on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Enlightenment portrait of education, *Emile*. Rousseau pre-

scribed an extensive rational and practical regime for his imaginary male charge, Emile, who was to learn to think for himself on all matters, but argued that his female counterpart, Sophie, should be raised to be simply a pleasing helpmeet for him, looking to him for guidance rather than thinking for herself. Wollstonecraft argued at length that Rousseau was misguided in his approach to women's education: women were autonomous rational beings, and not to educate them as such was not only to deny their true humanity, but to undermine the basis of society itself. Women needed to be the moral guardians of their own virtue, and to be educated to that end, with all the tools the Enlightenment could provide.

In the English-speaking world, feminist history has been reluctant to go back any further than the Enlightenment in addressing the emergence of feminist historiography. This is largely because it tends to see discussion of female virtue, particularly with reference to anything like a religious duty to be virtuous, as a trap, with the terms necessarily controlled by patriarchal discourse, whereas most pre-Enlightenment Western systematic discussion of the dignity and rationality of women was argued in religious terms. Sheila Delaney's 'Rewriting women good: gender and the anxiety of influence in two late-medieval texts' is a good example of this sort of critique<sup>1</sup>. But feminist history exposes its own shallow roots when it refuses to engage with the self-proclaimed concerns of pre-Enlightenment women writers. Feminism needs here to learn from the Womanist critique that religion, while certainly susceptible to misogynist abuse, is not the preserve of men: well channelled, it offers an unparalleled source of personal and community empowerment to women. The problem is to pass that empowerment on from one generation to the next, because a common strategy of eroded communities is to constantly overwrite their own history. In consequence, women's history has to wrestle with the continuous disgust of new generations of young women at its poverty and bleakness, compared with the power of the present and the sparkling possibility of what is still to come. It can seem like nothing more than an invitation to congratulate oppressed women of the past for colluding in their own oppression.

<sup>1</sup> Sheila DELANEY, 'Rewriting women good: gender and the anxiety of influence in two late-medieval texts' in her *Medieval Literary Politics: Shapes of Ideology* (Manchester University Press, Manchester 1990) 74-87.

As it happens, the first woman writer whose works survive to have systematically tackled cultural misogyny –credited as such by Simone de Beauvoir herself– was a Venetian woman who lived and wrote in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century France, and she deserves to be far more widely known and celebrated than she is, even though she has been becoming more renowned in recent years. Her name is Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), and she probably ended her life as a Dominican nun. Her achievement in tackling misogyny simultaneously from a psychological, authorial, literary, philosophical, religious, historical, political, mythological, legal, cultural, military and edificatory point of view in her work *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) is extraordinary, as is the importance of her recognition that misogyny and the cultural marginalisation of women must be addressed both negatively and positively at the same time<sup>2</sup>.

Christine was a remarkable woman, the child of a Bolognese doctor, Tommaso di Pizzano, and a Venetian mother, who was brought up in Paris with her brothers when her father became court physician to Charles V. She read widely in French and probably also Italian, was married aged 15 and had three children, but ten years later she was left a widow, having also lost her father. She was left to support her mother, her children and a niece, which she did by becoming a French vernacular manuscript copyist, an area in which there were many openings because of the flowering of courtly literature in the vernacular in late fourteenth-century France. She probably worked for several different workshops on prestige illustrated manuscripts, including for leading figures at court, both male and female. She certainly had access to a wide variety of books.

Like many intelligent editors since, Christine was incensed by the pitiful quality of some of the material she found herself copying. In particular, she was disgusted by the casual hatred and belittling of women that was displayed in so much polite and courtly literature of the day. The expansion of vernacular literature had facilitated endless recycling of classical tropes in self-proclaimed moral treatises by third-class masculine minds, and every half-educated male story-teller was able to fall back on verbal abuse of women when he ran out of other ideas for cheap

<sup>2</sup> See Elena LAURENZI, "Christine de Pizan: Una femminista ante litteram?", *Revista de Dones i Textualitat* 15 (1 Jan. 2009) 301-314.

laughs, a moral to his story or a recommendation to the men in his audience. For behind the vernacular *dits* and *fabliaux*, the moral treatises and the comic stories, sat a body of authoritative literature, medical, legal, philosophical and theological, which provided all the ammunition needed for knock-down, argument-ending put-downs by the slanderers of women— particularly when tales of physical knocking-down or worse could be added if necessary. Added to this were other works, cleverer and more cynical, which drew on all the misogynist tropes, such as the *Roman de la Rose* and other courtly love literature. These encouraged would-be lovers to treat women as prey, animals to be hunted down, to be taken by force or trickery if not by persuasion. What we know today as rape culture, in other words.

Christine de Pizan began her own writing career with inventive responses to the slander of women in various different literary genres. Initially, her approach was not theological or philosophical but playful, employing the classicising tropes of late medieval Italian and French courtly literature. Her first lengthy original work, *Epistre au dieu d'Amours* (*Letter of the god of Love*), written in 1399, uses Cupid to accuse knights of slandering women when they have failed to seduce them, instead of protecting their good names as the chivalric code would demand. The following year, she wrote the more serious *Epistre Othea*, a courtesy book purporting to be addressed to the young Hector of Troy aimed at young knights, again on a classical model, which among other areas of advice also took on misogynist stereotypes. She then went on to tackle directly the key pernicious work she had in her sights, the *Roman de la Rose*, beginning a literary correspondence taking its faults to task with a circle of important male defenders of the work from the court, Charles VI's notary Gontier Col, his brother Pierre, a canon of Notre Dame de Paris, and Jean de Montreuil, Provost of Lille. For them, the *Roman* was a skilful condemnation of the pursuit of sensual love. For her, it was unjust and immoral, treating women as incapable of reason or moral discernment, and refusing to recognise their humanity. This skirmish was an interesting one, fought at the margins of the authority of each. Christine wrote as a literary expert about a literary work, but her arguments were essentially theological and philosophical: it is bad philosophy to assume that women are inherently morally incapable, or indeed that men should take advantage of the fact even if it were so; it is bad theology to claim that women are not created capable of taking

responsibility for their Christian duties as disciples, or that men should think of women as sexual prey rather than fellow human beings and fellow Christians. Her opponents trespassed onto literary terrain to argue that the *Roman de la Rose* was in fact intended to condemn the lustful male pursuit of rape and adultery that it appeared to advocate.

In 1405, Christine turned to a more comprehensive project in defence of women: the *Book of the City of Ladies* is a considerable step up even from her own previous work. She recognised that the entire theoretical underpinning of misogyny needed to be addressed simultaneously and systematically, both by analysing and demolishing the philosophical and theological missteps behind it, and by offering an alternative, positive analysis of what women were capable of in the form of a compendium of discussions of exemplary historical women. For the latter, she would draw heavily on Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*, published some twenty-five years earlier, a series of mini-biographies of illustrious women of classical antiquity culled from a wide variety of sources, but she would supplement it with discussions of women from the Bible, with some more contemporary love stories, this time from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and in Part III, with sample virgin martyr and transvestite monk stories from Jean de Vignay's translation of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historialis*, the *Miroir historique*. The tone would be a mix of Dante and Boccaccio, by turns mournful, elegiac, dreamy, comic, stirring, outrageous, gripping, angry, painful, pleasant and delightful. The arguments would on the surface consist largely of logical ripostes of the knock-down variety and sweeping claims on the basis of experience, but beneath the surface they were very much more skilful than they might appear: any whiff of heresy, immorality or political rebellion is carefully avoided by disclaimers, and not an argument is employed which cannot be paralleled in well-established authors. Unnamed clerical opponents hover in the background, but she says nothing they could get a hold of: all her theological points, though trenchant, are couched in such undeniable terms as to be self-evidently true in that society, based as they are on the goodness of God as Creator, the unassailable goodness of the Virgin Mary within the created order, and the central importance of the moral struggle to the Christian life of all rational individuals. Christine is extremely careful with who she attacks by name and how, but she is also not afraid to make some very bold moves indeed, including her insertion of herself and her project into both sacred and secular history.

It was an astonishingly ambitious project, because the work was both to embody the intellectual, literary and theological capabilities of women in the person of its authoress, and to set out a host of examples of women of achievement from the whole of sacred and profane history, mythology and literature, and this as far as possible without arrogance, envy or ill-will towards potential male interlocutors. Instead, the most important intellectual moves are carried out in the form of consolation of the distressed narrator by three qualities personified as gracious ladies, Reason, Uprightness (Rectitude) and Justice, profiting from their feminine gender as abstract nouns. The City of Ladies would be a women's castle, an interior fortress of psychological protection and a space from which women could issue to take their part in society. Christine drew for her overall concept on Augustine's *City of God*, for the structure of her work (via Boccaccio) on Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus*, to which her work is an implicit response, and for its ostensible genre on the manual of architecture<sup>3</sup>.

Part I begins with a portrait of the psychological threat the sheer abundance of misogyny in male-authored literature represents for the female narrator. She introduces herself as a serious scholar, in her study, surrounded by her extensive and varied library, turning to something light for respite at the end of an intellectually tiring day. She lights on Matheolus' *Book of Lamentations*, a satire on marriage. She finds it slanderous, immoral, and without authority. But it leads her on to reflect on why so many men of authority, both clerics and others, philosophers, poets and orators, seem unanimous in the view that the female nature is wholly given up to vice.

The narrator internalises the misogyny, and becomes convinced that her own experience to the contrary, based on knowledge of countless good women of all social ranks, cannot stand before the combined weight of the views of so many learned men. She comes to doubt even

<sup>3</sup> Jerome derived his living quarters, his money and his opportunities for scholarship entirely from women by the time he wrote *De Viris Illustribus*; the work represents a calculated snub to the scholarship and diplomatic abilities of the generation of aristocratic Roman nuns who did so much to foster Latin Christian learning and make peace among the churches in the late fourth century. Although Christine de Pizan knew nothing of Melania, Marcella and Paula, the *Book of the City of Ladies* implicitly critiques Jerome's silent writing of women out of early Christian intellectual history.

the wisdom and goodness of God, who could create such a vile object, a vessel in which all the sin and evil of the world has been collected and preserved. But her deep and innate theological sense of God's goodness and skill in creation pulls her back from her despair, leaving her torn between her faith in the goodness of God's creation and her puzzlement as to the apparent universal legal condemnation which women have suffered and in which they stand.

The three consolatory ladies approach, and she makes the sign of the cross in case they are a diabolical illusion. But Reason makes short work of her doubts, both psychological and on the basis of authority, with a series of knock-down arguments. She points out that fine gold is tested and beaten into shape, and that philosophers are often wrong, since they progress by disagreeing with and correcting one another, as Aristotle corrects Plato in the *Metaphysics*, and is himself corrected by the Doctors of the Church on various points, including by St Augustine. The views of philosophers are not articles of faith, and the views of the poets are often to be read antiphrastically, as saying the opposite of what they appear to be saying. The narrator is thus licensed to read against the grain, turning passages written against women to their honour, as in the usual manner of panegyric to princes. In a neat hit, Reason argues that Matheolus should probably be read the same way, because otherwise many of his words about holy and God-given marriage are frankly heretical. He and the author of the *Roman de la Rose* are simply liars on the subject of marriage and matrimonial power relations, whom the narrator's own experience of marriage can easily refute. Men who slander women harm themselves more than the women they slander.

Reason declares the three ladies to be sent generally by God for the correction of both men and women, but in this case to build a defensive fortress for women, who have been long lacking a defensive wall, and exposed to the ravages of detractors, while the male knights who should have protected them have abandoned them to their foes. Even the strongest city will fall if there is no-one to defend it, and even the weakest legal case will prevail if no-one contests it. Women have trusted in God and endured the slanders against them, and God has now sent a liberator. Reason announces to Christine that she, because of her dedication to knowledge, has been chosen by God to free women from Pharaoh and to build and defend the city with the aid of Reason, Uprightness



and Justice, drawing from them as from a fresh spring of water. The city, unlike Troy or Thebes, will stand forever, and will never fall or be taken, but will always prosper.

Modern commentators often see this as a secular annunciation, with Christine responding like the Virgin Mary, ‘Behold your handmaiden, ready to do your bidding’<sup>4</sup>. But Christine’s project is sacred as well as secular, and she presents herself as one in a line of those commissioned by God for noble tasks of liberation and building, including Moses, David and St Thomas the Apostle, whom she refers to as having created a palace in the heavens for the King of India. Her task is no mere literary fiction: she truly presents herself as chosen by God to be the liberator and defender of women for all time to come, and as agreeing to the task.

Reason has Christine find the city on literature, ‘where every good thing grows in abundance’. She must begin by asking good questions with the spade of her intelligence, and letting Reason answer, pile up the dirt and then carry it away in loads. What ensues is a grammar of misogyny. If it is wrong, as Reason indicates, for (male) authors to slander women, the narrator asks, is it out of nature that they do it, or do they do it out of hatred? The reply is implicitly that it is against nature for men to slander women: there is no closer bond created by God in nature than that between men and women. Male writers slander women in general for various reasons, however, not only hatred: some genuinely (though unjustly) target all women to try and save their fellow men from those few who really do mean them harm, or to try and warn them off the danger from such women, or to warn them off lust in general. Reason argues that this is like denouncing fire because some people are burned by it, or water because some people are drowned by it. Others slander women out of envy, or impotence, or their own lust, or a desire to show off their learning, or simply because they enjoy slandering others. Reason sets out the different portraits of those who do these things with humour, presenting Matheolus, for example, as a self-confessed bitter old man slandering young women because they no longer pay him any attention, while she is careful to do justice to old men of wisdom and honour who only seek to warn people off vice in general. Men who

<sup>4</sup> V.A. KOLVE, “The annunciation to Christine: authorial empowerment in the *Book of the City of Ladies*”, in Brendan Cassidy (ed.) *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993) 171-96.

slander women in general are accused of going against both reason and nature, since all men owe a debt to women that can never be repaid for their very lives, and even birds and beasts love their mates.

Reason and Christine then go systematically through various authors and books which attack women, ancient and modern, and various still familiar arguments, refuting them all, some carefully and some more dismissively. Females are not the result of some biological deficiency, they are in the image of God. The image is in their souls, and these are as noble and virtuous as men's. Cicero is wrong to say a man who serves a woman abases himself, because women are not naturally inferior to men, since superiority and inferiority depend on virtue and the degree to which one has perfected nature and morals, so that the Virgin Mary is exalted above men and even the angels, and whoever serves her is blessed. Cato says if woman had not been created men would converse with the gods; Reason says yes, with the pagan gods, who are the devils in hell, had it not been for Mary. Rather, humankind sits side by side with God because of a woman: far more was won through Mary than was lost through Eve. And both men and women should in any case praise Eve, because she was the means by which the greatest honour ever done to human beings, being united with God, came about.

Women enjoy the company of children not because they are childish but because they are kind and gentle, and they share their tender love of children with Jesus himself; they flock to church not because they are flirtatious but because they are charitable; they avoid taverns not because they are gluttonous but because they are restrained. God made women to 'weep, talk and spin' because all three are holy, and means of salvation. Jesus responded to the tears of Mary Magdalene, Martha and the widow of Nain by raising those they loved from the dead, and to Monica's by saving her son Augustine. Women's speech announced the Resurrection; Jesus tested the Canaanite woman's speech, and then praised her for speaking with such wisdom, finding greater faith in her than in the apostles themselves; the Samaritan woman drew forth words of divine comfort by her own words; and the woman who shouted out 'Blessed be the womb which bore you and the breasts which fed you' spoke a glorious truth. And spinning is essential both for serving God and for maintaining rational society.

This section of the work (Part I, chapters 1-10) is lightly, skilfully and humorously done, to such an extent that it is easy to miss the com-

prehensive nature of the arguments, and their theological effectiveness. The goodness of God the creator, who does not create anything flawed or in vain, is the logical key to the goodness of women. But women are twice good, in this portrayal: good when they are strong, because they are admirable in themselves, and good when they are weak, because they attract God's loving kindness and mercy. Men, meanwhile, are expected to be both chivalrous protectors and defenders of women, and their grateful sons; weakness on their part, either the intellectual weakness of using foolish arguments to attack women, an even worse fault if they are otherwise intelligent, or more especially the moral weakness of slandering women through jealousy, self-importance or frustrated lust, leaves them only fit to be laughed at.

Only in one area does Reason seem to have effectively nothing to say, and it was an area which was materially very painful to Christine de Pizan: the bringing of lawsuits. Her autobiographical *Avision*, modelled on Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which she wrote shortly after the *City of Ladies*, tells of her humiliating experience as a widow of trying to defend herself against lawsuits taking advantage of her weak position, with no adult male in her household who could appear in a court of law on her behalf. 'Why are women allowed neither to present a case at trial, nor to bear witness, nor to pass sentence, since some men have claimed that it is all because of some woman or other who behaved badly in a court of law?' Reason replies that that story is a malicious fabrication, but that Christine cannot know the reason for everything. It is not because women lack the intelligence to understand law, or that they are unable to govern wisely. However, God created men and women for different things, like different servants in a household, and men are given loud voices and strong bodies to stride about, speak boldly and follow up a lawsuit if necessary by physical violence, so there is no need for women to do the same if there are suitable men available.

This may seem—indeed, has often seemed to modern commentators—a disappointingly reductive response, but it is important to note that the narrative now moves immediately to an implicit '*esse implies posse*' argument: there have been women rulers both in distant past and in recent memory, and even in the present, who have been excellent law-makers and law upholders. Reason immediately moves to provide stories of powerful women rulers and warriors who did stride or ride about, legislate and employ physical violence in the cause of good governance,

beginning with the Empress Nicaula, the Queen of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba had been contextualised in many different ways in the Jewish and Christian traditions, including as the dark and beautiful protagonist of the Song of Songs, whether married to Solomon or not. Some traditions made her a temptress, or reckoned that her encounter with Solomon in 1 Kings 10 represented a triumph of wisdom over chaos or evil. For Christine de Pizan, on the other hand, drawing and improving on Boccaccio's account in his *De Claris Mulieribus*, which itself is based on Josephus, Nicaula is the first exemplary woman of the City of Ladies, a fabulously successful ruler of a vast territory from Ethiopia to Egypt, as well as Arabia, a skilled, highly educated politician, lawmaker and bringer of civilisation who was also fabulously wealthy and maintained a magnificent court, never married and never had or wanted a man at her side. She is not, however, incorporated into the building itself at this point, because she will reappear as one of the Prophetesses who make up the precious stones to be used in the city's interior buildings.

Reason continues her account with a series of French queens and noblewomen, both historical and contemporary, who ruled as regents after the death of their husbands in wise and civilised fashion, seeking justice, keeping their lands together, and being loved by their subjects. She concludes the section on the law by arguing that the husbands of intelligent women would be wise to trust and consult them on legal matters, as she says in the *Avision* that her own beloved husband had not trusted her, thus dooming her to make sense of the family's affairs after his death from a position of complete ignorance of the legal realities. Reason's last word on the law is that women in general should be glad they are normally spared responsibility for administering it, because punishing the guilty is a fearful human and divine responsibility, the penalties for mishandling which are severe, an argument familiar from Augustine's *City of God*. We might see here a culpable abdication of feminist responsibility on Christine's own part, but not an unthinking one, given the near synonymy of the dispensing of justice with torture and execution in her day.

Nicaula and the French queens still count as part of the excavation work of the city, the arguments against misogyny. But Reason now moves on to the foundations of the city, which will be entirely made up of virtuous women in the Homeric sense, women who were courageous in war, all culled from Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus*. Christine

de Pizan knew how to get the attention of her male readers. She can certainly be accused of exceptionalism, founding her city on the few women who could be deemed to have excelled in the masculine spheres of government and the military arts. But as we shall see, the job of these exceptional women is to be champions for other women, to take up conceptual space and hold the fort for the great mass of women of all degrees who are invited to make their homes in the city.

Reason's choice for the city's initial foundation stone in particular is jaw-dropping: the Assyrian queen Semiramis, builder of cities and fortifier of Babylon, who is also famous in medieval tradition (though the narrative does not mention this) for inventing the court eunuch as a profession, having boys castrated expressly so they can serve in the chambers of royal women when they are adults. Semiramis was also deemed in medieval legend to have married her own son, and was therefore often considered a clear example of a very wicked woman. But Reason gives any criticism of her for this short shrift: she was not a Christian, and she was subject to no written law which forbade it. (These are arguments often used in medieval ethical discussions to exonerate the patriarchs for their polygamy, or the Pharaohs for marrying their sisters.) Semiramis as the narrative presents her is a female Alexander the Great, but surpasses him, having extended the Mesopotamian territory she inherited from her husband by conquering India and Ethiopia, as well as 'the whole of the East'.

A certain literary outrageousness is built into the scheme as a whole. Christine, among all that she had taken from Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* for this work, had also learned from the *Decameron* how to string together an entertaining collection of stories that both men and women could enjoy reading and talking about together. She launches on a series of stories about warrior women: Amazon queens, Zenobia of Palmyra, Artemisia of Caria, Camilla the Volscian and Berenice of Cappadocia. They seem to be mainly chosen, from the much longer list which Boccaccio provides, for the fearsomeness of the enemies they engaged with. The Amazon queens, whose reign is deduced from literary references to them to have lasted 800 years, kill Cyrus, King of the Persians, and engage with both the Greeks and the Trojans, who both respected and feared them as warriors. Zenobia and Artemesia are deemed to have had military success against the great Persian rulers Sapor and Xerxes where both the Romans and the Greeks failed.

Reason deems the foundations secure, and moves to the enclosure wall, which is made up of women of learning. Reason asserts that if women were educated like men, they would do just as well in both technical subjects and abstract knowledge (*arts et sciences*): it is sitting in the house all day and being deprived of variety of experience which dulls their intelligence. She argues, disappointingly for modern readers, that it is not necessarily for the public good that women should do what men do, which is why girls are not educated as boys are. But women can educate themselves, just as country-dwelling peasant men can educate themselves by coming to a city: by implication, this is what the city of ladies is for. She reproduces Boccaccio's praise of learned women such as Cicero's acquaintance Cornificia, the fourth-century Christian poetess Proba, the Greek poetess Sappho, and diviners such as Manto, Medea and Circe, who are excused their knowledge of what effectively amounts to sorcery on the grounds that these things were normal in the societies they lived in. She goes on to accredit various legendary women, ancient goddesses whom she deems to have been in fact just clever human beings, with inventing new arts and sciences: Nicostrata with inventing the Latin alphabet and Latin grammar; Minerva with spinning, weaving, pressing oil, building chariots, forging weapons of iron and steel and making wind instruments; Ceres with the tools of agriculture; Isis with the art of gardening; Arachne with the art of growing and working flax, and the art of dyeing wool and making tapestries; and Pamphile with making silk from silkworms. Drawing on Boccaccio's praise of Nicostrata/Carmentia in particular, Reason says men ought to stop slandering women and be grateful for all the benefits of civilisation they have conferred, and Christine herself adds that clerics in particular should be grateful to women for giving them the Latin alphabet which they regard so highly, as knights should thank them for their protecting armour. Even Jesus honoured Ceres by choosing to give his body to men and women in the form of the bread she had invented.

The narrative turns to practical judgement, or prudence, in which women are deemed to be able to be expert because they often run a household: reason cites the 'capable wife' of Proverbs, the early Roman queen Gaia Cirilla, Dido of Carthage, Opis the wife of Saturn, and Lavinia, the second wife of Aeneas. Reason then declares the enclosure walls complete and gives way to Uprightness (Rectitude) to begin to build the houses and buildings within the city.

Books 2 and 3 can seem disappointing after this beginning, both because the vision seems to shrink, and because the extended metaphor of the city begins to get lost among all the figures being discussed. Uprightness (Rectitude), the second lady, who protects the truth and the rights of the poor, with her straight canon or measuring rod which is also the standard of peace, is supposedly responsible for the interior buildings of the city, and its roads and squares. She begins with amassing some blocks of quarried precious stone to be used to decorate the buildings, in the shape of prophetesses, pagan and Jewish (the ten sibyls, three other pagan prophetesses, and Deborah, Elizabeth, Anna, and the Queen of Sheba), but after that the metaphor breaks down, the buildings are replaced by women themselves, and the dialogue between Uprightness and Christine becomes much more domestic. Why do parents feel disappointed when a girl is born, when boys are in fact more expensive and more troublesome? Why are men advised not to marry for fear of shrewish wives, when men in fact hold all the power in the matrimonial relationship, and it is women who are at risk of effective slavery, impoverishment and domestic violence? Why are men discouraged from taking their wives' advice, even if they know their wives to be sensible and practical women? Why is it assumed that women would be corrupted by education, when the very nature of education works against corruption? Why are women accused of being habitually unchaste, when they are far more habitually chaste than men are? Why are they assumed to want or enjoy rape, when no sane person would enjoy such a thing? Why are women accused of inconstancy, when they are far more constant than men are? Why are sexual sins deemed so much worse in women than in men, especially if women are assumed to be morally weaker than men? Why are virtuous women sexual targets for some men precisely because of their virtue? Why are women considered avaricious when they are generally simply poor? All of these points are addressed with a series of stories of women from history, the Bible or contemporary literature; as the book progresses, entertainment rather supplants demonstration of the points at issue, and the *Decameron* the *De Claris Mulieribus*. At the end of Book 2, all the leading French queens and princesses are invited into the city by name, along with an infinite number of countesses, baronesses, ladies, maidens, bourgeois, and women of every estate.

Book 3 is more or less entirely theological, but it is also the portion of the work which is likely most to horrify modern feminist theologians.

The Virgin Mary takes her place as Queen of the city, in the company of her two sisters and Mary Magdalene, and the rest of their most honoured company is made up of virgin martyrs and holy women, including St Catherine, St Margaret, St Lucy of Rome, St Lucy of Siracuse, St Martina, St Justine, St Marina/Marinus, St Euphrosina and many other saints, in particular St Christine. Their stories, every last one apocryphal, though often containing details from genuine historical martyr accounts, appear to modern eyes in most cases as torture pornography. The women are stripped naked, hung upside down, spread-eagled, flogged, paraded through the town, their breasts cut off, but constantly singing, praying, giving off wonderfully sweet odours, bleeding milk instead of blood, and either exhausting or converting their torturers as they go. Their tormenters are emperors, governors and sometimes fathers, all vying with each other to be crueller than one another. Christine ends the work with a speech to all women telling them to be humble and long-suffering, and to avoid the attacks of men on their virtue.

What kind of a model for academic feminist theology can this possibly represent? An important one, I would argue.

First of all, Christine de Pizan's portrait of the all-pervasive cultural power of literary misogyny, the way it forces itself on even such an exceptionally talented woman as Christine herself until she has completely internalised it against her own experience and judgement, has never been bettered. For Christine, to study at all was to confront misogyny on every side, at both the scholarly and the popular level. The entire literary cultural landscape which she encountered was a conspiracy to gaslight women, to persuade them that the evidence of their own reason and experience must be faulty because it disagreed with male authorities, religious, philosophical, political and literary. She did not shrink either from that conclusion, paranoid though it might have seemed, or from systematically exposing its flawed logic in every area. But her very first intellectual move sprang from the depths of her faith in a good God: God could not have made women inherently flawed and evil, because God made all things well.

Analysis of theological misogyny is well developed in academic feminism, but in the churches it rather lags behind. In the Catholic Church, in particular, that analysis has barely begun; indeed, it has gone into reverse over the last twenty years or more, as only men who are attested



to explicitly believe that women cannot be ordained are permitted to become bishops, replacing a generation who were in at least some cases prepared to consider the point. Pope Francis still habitually speaks in theological terms of ‘woman’: Christine de Pizan explained why that move is intellectually illegitimate more than 600 years ago. There is no generic ‘woman’ as a separate theological or moral subject— there are only women.

Christine teaches us that our analysis of misogyny must be systematically pursued throughout the whole of theological culture, from the most scholarly level to the most frivolous, and it must be done by women themselves. That means tackling linguistic misogyny— the use of language which excludes women in both the liturgy and in church documents; philosophical misogyny— the consigning of women to the realm of moral ‘other’, to be judged and commented on from a supposed normative male perspective; and theological misogyny— the notion that God qua God is inherently masculine. That is before we even start on governance, or the exclusion of women from the Magisterium, or the condoning of sexual violence.

But Christine also teaches us that there is no substitute for picking our way through history, identifying and cataloguing the achievements of women and seeking to understand and build on them, even if we find them deeply distasteful. Of course, much of the history that she drew on was embroidered or mythological. But less than is sometimes thought. Semiramis was a real historical figure of considerable importance. The Queen of Sheba is as likely to have existed as Solomon. The tendency of ‘rational’ males to decide that all mentions of females in ancient texts are probably later inventions needs to be challenged, in Scripture scholarship as in Classics.

Finally, Christine invites us to join her unfinished project, begun 600 years ago, of building a united conceptual safe space for women within the City of God on earth. For her, it was a literary project, but it was also a psychological project, a cultural project, and above all a theological project, as real a call from God as that of Moses or David. The space she marked out was wide, and pushed the boundaries: pagans, Jews and Christians living side by side; strong women, dangerous women and passionate women taking their place side by side with dutiful daughters and long-suffering wives. The exceptional women rulers, scholars and

artists kept the conceptual space open for those whose concerns were necessarily more domestic. But above all, it was a place of reason, truth, justice and the rejection of lies and slander. More or less what we would hope for from the world of academia, and certainly what we would like believe was possible in the Church.