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From Consolation to Autonomy: Reclaiming Christine de Pizan as a Feminist Philosopher

Da consolação à autonomia: resgatando Christine de Pizan como filósofa feminista

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Abstract: This article examines Christine de Pizan's engagement with the tradition of philosophical consolation in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, arguing that she transforms Boethius's *consolatio* into a feminist framework of ethical and intellectual resistance. While adopting the allegorical and dialectical forms of T*he Consolation of Philosophy*, Christine rejects consolation's transcendent basis, grounding it instead in historical *exempla* and collective female experience. By reinterpreting these *exempla*, she converts a classical instrument of moral instruction into a historiographical method that reconstructs history as a process shaped by women's agency rather than a male-authored narrative of the past: "We are here" say the three Ladies, "to console you…and correct the misconceptions that have clouded your judgement, leading you to give credence tot he prevailing opinion" (Christine, 2018, p.23). At the center of this transformation lies Christine's notion of autonomy as rational self-governance and critical discernment from inherited prejudice. Christine's exhortation to return to oneself and reclaim one's understanding—"Do get a hold of yourself … Take the spade of your mind" (Christine, 2018, pp.25, 31) —marks the passage from emotional relief to rational autonomy. The article situates Christine within the consolatio tradition, showing how her philosophical innovation integrates ethical consolation with historical critique, thereby asserting women's intellectual authority within the broader context of the *querelle des femmes*.
Keyword: Christine de Pizan; Boethius; consolation; autonomy; medieval philosophy; feminist historiography; querelle des femmes.

Resumo: Este artigo examina o engajamento de Christine de Pizan com a tradição da consolação filosófica em *O Livro da Cidade das Damas,* argumentando que ela transforma a *consolatio* de Boécio em uma estrutura feminista de resistência ética e intelectual. Embora adote as formas alegórica e dialética de *A Consolação da Filosofia*, Christine rejeita a base transcendental da consolação, fundamentando-a, em vez disso, em *exempla* históricos e na experiência coletiva feminina. Ao reinterpretar esses *exempla*, ela converte um instrumento clássico de instrução moral em um método historiográfico que reconstrói a história como um processo moldado pela agência das mulheres, e não como uma narrativa do passado escrita por homens: "We are here," dizem as três Damas, "to console you… and correct the misconceptions that have clouded your judgement, leading you to give credence to the prevailing opinion" (Christine, 2018, p.23). No centro dessa transformação está a noção de autonomia de Christine como autogoverno racional e discernimento crítico em relação ao preconceito herdado. A exortação de Christine para que se volte a si mesma e recupere a própria compreensão — "Do get a hold of yourself … Take the spade of your mind" (Christine, 2018, pp.25, 31) — marca a passagem do alívio emocional à autonomia racional. O artigo situa Christine dentro da tradição da *consolatio*, mostrando como sua inovação filosófica integra a consolação ética à crítica histórica, afirmando assim a autoridade intelectual das mulheres no contexto mais amplo da *querelle des femmes*.
Palavras-chave: Christine de Pizan; Boécio; consolação; autonomia; filosofia medieval; historiografia feminista; querelle das mulheres.

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Contribution to Scholarship

This article advances a reinterpretation of *The City of Ladies* as a work of consolation. It argues that Christine de Pizan deliberately reconfigures the Boethian *consolatio* as a philosophical form addressed to women. Through dialogical progression, and exemplary narration, she transforms a genre traditionally oriented toward the alleviation of individual suffering into a collective and regendered discourse of ethical meaning. In this displacement, consolation ceases to function as a merely therapeutic response to contingency and becomes a structured practice of intellectual reorientation. The text operates as a consolatory intervention: it leads its audience from epistemic disorientation to intellectual autonomy, and from the internalization of misogynistic discourse to philosophical self-possession. By "internalized misogyny" is meant the assimilation and reproduction of inherited structures of devaluation, whereby women come to endorse as their own the judgments that subordinate them. Christine's project intervenes at this level, exposing these sedimented beliefs and reconstituting the subject as capable of rational self-grounding.

Within the scholarship, this study situates itself at the intersection of established and neglected lines of inquiry. While previous work has acknowledged the presence of Boethian motifs in Christine's corpus, it has largely confined their analysis to texts other than *The City of Ladies*. At the same time, it responds directly to the challenge formulated by Hoche (2004), who has pointed to the absence of sustained engagement with Boethius in this work and questioned the critical privileging of alternative sources such as Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*. As Hoche observes: "Why have scholars looked elsewhere than Boethius for the philosophical influence on City of Ladies? A close examination of the parallels in both structure and philosophy reveals that Christine's work follows Boethius very closely: indeed, Boethius became a role model for Christine in her goal to address the problems of being a woman in late medieval France" (Hoche, 2004, p.23).

Christine and the Boethian paradigm in the prior scholarship

Boethius composed *The Consolation of Philosophy* during his imprisonment in 525 under accusations of political conspiracy and sacrilege (Marenbon 2002). The text circulated widely in medieval France in both Latin and vernacular forms (Cropp, 1987). As a court writer with access to the royal library, Christine would likely have encountered one or more of these versions (Potin,1999). Several elements support this conclusion: the presence of the text in the Louvre inventories before 1405 (Delisle, 1907. Avril,1968), her documented connection to Gilles Malet (Christine, 1836), and her intellectual alliance with Jean Gerson (Richards, 2000), who likely facilitated access to philosophical materials.

The broader context of Boethius's reception in late medieval France confirms that Christine worked within a milieu deeply informed by Boethian discourse. Cropp's philological work compares Christine's prose with medieval French translations of *The Consolation*, showing that her intellectual environment was permeated by Boethian thought. Among these, *Le Livre de Boece de Consolacion* appears to have been widely circulated and structurally faithful to the original. Although the precise version Christine consulted cannot be determined, Cropp argues that her use of dialogue, allegory, and rhetorical structure reflects a deliberate engagement with Boethian reasoning. In *Boèce et Christine* (G. M. Cropp, 1987), Cropp traces such engagement across works like *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune* and *Le Livre du Chemin de long estude*, emphasizing transformation rather than direct citation.

Drawing a compelling parallel between *The Consolation* and *The City of Ladies*, Hoche notes that both works employ allegorical female figures who guide the protagonist toward understanding: Lady Philosophy in Boethius, and Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice in Christine. Through dialogue, these figures lead from confusion to clarity (Hoche, 2004). Structural correspondences also emerge: both protagonists begin in a position of humility, yet Christine's narrator exhibits composure and rational control absent from Boethius's despair. This difference underscores her philosophical agency. Both authors interrogate the instability of power. Boethius examines the mutability of fortune, while Christine reorients this problem toward women's exclusion from authority. Her emphasis on virtue over fame, expressed through exemplary figures, reflects a Boethian ethical framework. As Hoche observes, *The City of Ladies* reproduces an inward trajectory, shifting from external goods to inner virtues (Hoche, 2004, p.26). Regarding sources, Hoche suggests that Christine likely encountered Boethius through Jean de Meun's translation, though other versions remain possible. What remains decisive is her creative assimilation of Boethian thought, particularly her transformation of consolation into a mode of ethical reasoning and social critique.

Consolation as philosophical and rhetorical strategy: Christine's borrowings from Consolation of Philosophy

The City of Ladies opens like *The Consolation of Philosophy,* with a paradigmatic scene of suffering. Following the traditional *consolatio*, the characters in both books find themselves in a state of imbalance and introspection. Boethius mourns the betrayal of his philosophical commitments and the apparent collapse of justice: In the lament phase Boethius is depicted as struggling to come to terms with the harsh judgment and pervasive misunderstanding that have led to unjust condemnation. His recollection of a time characterized by fervent intellectual engagement and enthusiasm for his writings is now overshadowed by the painful realization that his present condition permits only sorrow and tears: "I who once wrote songs with joyful zeal, am driven by grief to enter weeping mode. See the Muses, cheeks all torn, dictate, And wet my face with elegiac verse" (Boethius, 1999, p.3).

Christine's initial disbelief gives way to fundamental epistemological and ethical questions: Can one rationally accept the claim that women are inherently flawed? Is a misogynistic worldview reconcilable with divine justice and perfection? Being exposed to a completely different way of looking at the world made her question her own beliefs and understanding: "Why did You not bring me into the world a male, so that I would have the right qualities to serve You better and not go astray, and be as perfect as men claim to be? … Those words and many others I spoke to God, sick at heart and lamenting in my foolishness how deeply unhappy it made me that God had put me into this world in a female body" (Christine, 2018, p.22-23). This led her to reflect on fundamental aspects of a unhealthy mind: is it possible for someone to really believe that women are inherently negative? Is a misogynistic stance morally justified?

Typical of consolatory writing, the portrayal of a sense of dismay is an important component in the first scene of both books. Boethius's situation is described "as a lethargy, common disease of deluded minds" (Boethius, 1999, p.6). Boethius, imprisoned and betrayed, experiences a metaphorical affliction—*lethargum patitur*—which signifies his philosophical disorientation. In the same way Christine is left in a state of lethargy: "And so I should accept the opinions of others rather than trust my own feelings and experience. I lingered on this thought at such length that I seemed to sink into *a trance (letargie in French text)*" (Christine, 2018, p.22, Christine, 2003, p.44). Christine, upon confronting misogynistic texts, undergoes a comparable crisis. Her suffering, however, is not merely personal but collective, reflecting the systemic oppression of women. Whereas Boethius' lamentation is framed within a personal and political context (Boethius, 1999, p.10-11) Christine's engagement transforms lamentation into a critique of patriarchal epistemologies. Both figures share the psychological anguish of unjust accusation, but the way Christine has framed her discussion introduces a very feminised existential dynamic: the intersection of intellectual

pursuit and domestic obligation, symbolized by the interruption of her mother's call for dinner: ".. I had often heard it said that this particular book, unlike many others, spoke in praise of women. I thought I would leaf through it to amuse myself, but I had hardly begun when my mother called to say it was time for supper. So I put the book aside, intending to return to it the next day" (Christine, 2018, p.21). This detail serves to emphasise the inextricable entanglement of philosophical inquiry with the demands of quotidian life. The tension between abstract thought and contingent reality is not merely acknowledged but embodied in this moment, illustrating the impossibility of fully transcending practical concerns. Further in the text Christine also refers to the practical constraints. While her father supported her intellectual development, her mother's adherence to customary gender roles limited her education: " what prevented you", says Lady Rectitude, "from delving more deeply into sciences during your childhood was the female prejudice of your mother, who wanted to keep you engaged in the customary female activities of spinning and weaving" (Chrsitine, 2018, p.141).

Both texts converge on a classical consolatory logic: to heal, one must define. The wound is first circumscribed, then judged at its core; from this center, its consequences unfold and, once grasped, can be mastered—thus the soul recovers its composure. Where *The Consolation of Philosophy* imposes unity—a singular voice ordering distress into intelligibility—the *City of Ladies* fractures this model. Christine withdraws the autobiographical self, present in her *Vision* and speaks instead through a collective voice, where discomfort is not resolved but distributed. The accusations she confronts are a collective indictments, addressed to women as a class and, consequently, internalized as a question concerning the very ontological status of the feminine: "Why is it that so many men-clerics as well as others-have always been so ready to say and write such abominable and hateful things about women and their nature?" (Christine, 2018, p. 21). The pronoun here is not merely rhetorical; it marks the emergence of a shared condition. Thus, when she recalls that "…some authors have argued that women are by nature gluttonous and obsessed with food…" (Christine, p.38) or affirms that " women are not only pious; they also embrace charity" (Christine, 2018, p.39) and further, "It seems to me that this work is all done by women, and these are the noblest roads God can command us to follow" (Christine, 2018, p.39), she does not defend an individual subject but constructs a collective counter-discourse. Even her epistemic gestures: "I will give you some examples of how women are capable of careful reflection" (Christine, 2018, p. 91) are directed toward the rehabilitation of a plural intelligence, a shared rational capacity systematically denied. This insistence on the plurality of *femmes* reveals that the object of critique is not episodic defamation like in Boethius condemnation, but a structural denigration, sustained and reproduced within authoritative, predominantly male discourse. Christine's inquiry in the *City of Ladies* exceeds the bounds of personal lamentation: it interrogates the very conditions under which an entire sex is rendered suspect. In this sense, her work constitutes a decisive philosophical departure from the paradigm established by *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Whereas Boethius articulated consolation from the situated interiority of a condemned individual, Christine reconfigures consolation as intrinsically communal. Her voice does not ascend from the isolation of misfortune but emerges from within a shared historical and symbolic marginalization. If Boethius transforms personal adversity into philosophical exemplarity, Christine inversely transforms a collective injustice into the very ground of consolation itself. The consolatory project is thus reoriented: it is no longer the soul's inward reconciliation with fate, but the articulation of a collective defence and affirmation. In Christine's hands, the genre of consolation ceases to soothe the solitary subject and instead becomes the philosophical medium through which women, in their plurality, are restored to dignity, reason and moral agency.

Christine's reconfiguration of consolation is further intensified through her systematic use of exempla. Inherited from the classical consolatory tradition, such exempla function by situating individual suffering within a broader, shared horizon of human experience. Yet Christine reorients this device toward a distinctly feminist end: the narratives she assembles foreground women who, depite enduring injustice

and adversity, emerge a paradigms of courage, intellect, and virtue. As she states: "I will give you some examples of several women who were endowed with great strength. Their stories are interesting and serve as examples to others" (Christine, 2018, pp. 154). Each exemplum thus contributes to the constitution of a collective horizon in which women may recognize themselves not as isolated subjects, but as participants in an enduring tradition of excellence. The invocation of figures who have shaped human history serves to substantiate women's capacities, rendering consolation inseparable from epistemic and moral vindication. In this light, Minerva appears as a foundational figure of technical and cultural innovation, credited with the invention of textile production, the extraction of oil from fruit, and the forging of armor: she " was the first ever to think of shearing sheep and then picking, combing and carding the wool with various tools…Then she invented the tools to turn it into cloth and the technique of weaving…she discovered how to make oil from fruits…she developed the technique of using iron and steel to forge harnesses and armor" (Christine, 2018, p.77)".

Similarly Cornificia exemplifies intellectual rigor and poetic achievement, having pursued learning while " neglecting all female activities" to become "an outstanding poet"(Christine, 2018, p.70). Sappho is presented as both poet and philosopher, distinguished by her mastery across disciplines: " She was very skilled and an expert in many arts and sciences" (Christine, 2018, p.72). The same logic extends to Carmentis, who is credited with foundational contribution to linguistic knowledge, having " invented the Latin alphabet and syntax, how to form words, the difference between vowels and consonants and a complete introduction to the field of grammar" (Christine, 2018, p.76).

Christine further destabilizes gendered conceptions of virtue by foregrounding women who embody qualities traditionally coded as masculine. The Amazons whose society operates independently of male authority, exemplify political autonomy and military success: "They resolved that henceforth, they would govern the country themselves, without male supervision…they were so successful that they conquered a large part of Europe and the Asian region…they also founded many cities" (Christine, 2018, pp.51-52). In a similar vein, queen of Palmyra, is invoked as model of sovereign authority and material discipline, governing with such acuity that: "neither Gallienus nor, after him, Claudius, both Roman emperors who occupied part of the Orient on behalf of Rome, dared move against her" (Christine, 2018, p.60). Through this cumulative strategy, exempla cease to function as rhetorical ornamentation and instead become instruments of philosophical intervention: they articulate a counter-history in which women's intellectual, artistic, and political agency is rendered visible, thereby transforming consolation into a mode of collective empowerment.

The decline of philosophical authority

The guiding figure—central to the consolatory tradition—assumes markedly different configurations in Boethius and Christine. In *The Consolation*, Lady Philosophy appears as a singular, authoritative presence whose intervention initiates a process of rational healing, leading Boethius toward a renewed understanding of his suffering. Christine's *City of Ladies*, by contrast, pointedly refrains from invoking philosophy as such, thereby calling into question its sufficiency as an autoritative discipline. Where Boethius relies on a unified voice to articulate metaphysical truth, Christine disperses authority across the allegorical figures of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, thereby substituting a model of collective rationality for one of hierarchical instruction.

This divergence reflects, in part, an internal tension probably already present in Boethius (Marenbon, 2003). Lady Philosophy's authority, though initially absolute, is not without limits; her vision may itself be subject to demystification. As Marenbon observes, "Perhaps, her initial vision-like appearance should be taken as an illusion set up for Philosophy herself to deflate" (Marenbon, 2003, p.162). Christine radicalizes

this instability by reconfiguring philosophical discourse as historically situated and dialogical. The shift from a single guide to a triadic structure signals not merely a formal variation but a redefinition of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and authorized. Accordingly, while Boethius stages the consolation of an individual prisoner seeking reconciliation with divine order, Christine's interlocutors address the systemic marginalization of women, intervening directly in the social conditions that shape epistemic exclusion: "So do get a hold of yourself, regain your senses, and don't worry about these trivial matters. For you should know that bad things said about women do not dishonor women, only those who utter them" (Christine, 2018, p. 25).

Despite these differences, both works retain a shared structure of reassurance grounded in authoritative instruction. In Boethius, consolation begins with an encounter marked by asymmetry and reverence: "Tears had partly blinded me, and I could not make out who this woman of such imperious authority was. I could only fix my eyes on the ground overcome with surprise and wait in silence for what she would do next. She came closer and sat down on the edge of my bed. I felt her eyes resting on my face, downcast and lined with grief" (Boethius, 1999, p. 5). A parallel dynamic is evident in Christine's text, though it is inflected by compassion and pedagogical clarity: "My dear daughter, do not be afraid, because we haven't come here to harm you or upset you. We are here out of compassion, to console you in your distress, and to shed light on the misconceptions that have so clouded your judgement that you are rejecting what you know to be true and give credence to things merely by force of prevailing opinion, although you know better" (Christine, 2018, p. 23).

The contrast becomes sharper at the level of method. In Boethius, Lady Philosophy ultimately subordinates rhetoric and poetry to speculative reason, privileging demonstrative argument as the proper vehicle of truth. Christine, by contrast, redistributes discursive functions across Reason, Rectitude, and Justice: Reason governs epistemic discernment, Rectitude directs ethical action, and Justice articulates a normative horizon irreducible to individual cognition. This configuration does not reject rhetoric but integrates it into the very production of truth, thereby dissolving the strict opposition between persuasion and knowledge.

Such a reconfiguration entails a critique of philosophy's claim to epistemic finality. If philosophical reason were self-sufficient, it would command universal assent: "You seem to take every word of philosophers as article of faith" (Christine, 2018, p. 24). Yet, as Christine emphasizes, it remains internally divided and historically contingent: "…look closely at the greatest philosophers of all time whose rejection of women you quote, and see if they have never drawn the wrong conclusion. See if they don't contradict and correct each other, as you have seen for yourself in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where he argues and disputes their opinions, citing Plato and others. Note that Saint Augustine and other ecclesiastic authors of note have done the same" (Christine, 2018, p. 24). The dialogical structure of *The City of Ladies* thus exposes the mediated character of authority, showing how claims to truth are shaped by rhetorical practices and by the positionality of their enunciators. In assuming both the role of interlocutor and author, Christine reclaims interpretive authority.

Within this framework, persuasion is no longer subordinate to truth but constitutive of its emergence. Lady Reason's method exceeds simple refutation; it operates through a "rhetoric of philosophical repair" that combines rational argument with interpretive strategies such as antiphrasis, whereby authoritative texts are read against their apparent meaning. As she advises, "My advice to you is to turn their words to your advantage by interpreting the passages that speak ill of women the way they are meant to be understood.." (Christine, 2018, p.24). Persuasion here functions as a critical practice: it does not merely transmit truth but actively reconstructs it. The relation between persuasion and truth thus remains deliberately unresolved, generating a productive tension through which discourse acquires its critical

force. Truth, in this perspective, is neither immediate nor guaranteed; it emerges progressively through acts of interpretation that challenge and transform inherited assumptions.

Christine's philosphical reconfiguration of consolation

Christine departs from Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy by appropriating its consolatory framework while redirecting its purpose. She aims to demonstrate that women are not inferior and to restore their self confidence.

Christine grapples with the misogynistic discourse that contradicts her belief in divine order; the repugnance against women, is incompatible with the doctrine of God's infallibility.

Through the figure of Lady Reason Christine systematically dismantels negative stereotypes associated with women. The belief in male superiority is challenged on both rational and theological grounds. Acting as a philosophical razor, Lady Reason exposes the irrational bases of entrenched prejudice: "People's superiority or baseness does not depend on their gender, but on the perfection of their morals and virtues" (Christine, 2018, p.37). This method identifies and contests embedded assumptions through logical argumentations supported by historical, literary, and biblical evidence.

The assumption of female inferiority: The protagonist's central concern is whether being born male, would have been preferable, given the widespread perception of female wrongness. She initially internalizes this view: "" ..I concluded that God had created a vile creature when he fashioned woman. Indeed, I was astonished that such a worthy craftman could have produced such an abominable creature" (Christine, 2018, p.22). Lady Reason refutes this position by arguing that male superiority is incompatible with both reason and nature. Since Nature operates as God's instrument, it cannot produce anything contrary to the divine will: "How could Nature, God's handmaiden, be more powerful than her master, the almighty God, who conceived the form of man and woman after His own image and from whom she derives her authority?" (Christine, 2018, p.36). Accordingly, resemblance to God pertains not to the body, but to the soul. "But when people hear that God created man in His image, they are foolish enough to believe that this refers to His material body. That is incorrect…In fact, it refers to the soul, the intellectual spirit that will last to eternity in God's image" (Christine, 2018, p.37). The soul, as the true essence of the human being, is equally bestowed upon men and women: "God created this soul and put equally good and noble souls in the bodies of men and women" (Christine, 2018.p.37).

The biblical account of woman's creation from man's rib is likewise reinterpreted as a sign of equality rather than subordination: "He put Adam to sleep, and created woman from one of his ribs. That means that she was meant to stand beside him and not lie at his feet like a servant, and that he should love her like his own flesh" (Christine, 2018, p.36). Woman is not an afterthought but part of a unified divine intention: "woman was made by the Divine Craftman. And where was she created? In the Earthly Paradise. And from what? Was it a vile material? On the contrary! It was from the noblest material ever created, the body of man, that God made woman" (Chrisine, 2018, p.37). Even the Fall is reinterpreted in a realistic light, resulting, in my opinion, in a decidedly feminist commentary: "if Eve had not sinned, humankind would never have become one with God. Thus, both men and women should be greatful for this sin that has brought them so much honor" (Christine, 2018, p.37).

The alleged deficiency of the female body: Christine rejects the association between physical strength and moral virtue. Bodily imperfection does not entail moral or intellectual deficiency; all human beings exhibit some form of limitation. The claim that physical weakness implies inferiority is therefore unfounded. Exempla such as Alexander the Great, who was physically small and fragile but possessed immense

strength and influence, and Aristotle, who had a very unattractive face but made significant contributions to philosophy: illustrate the irrelevance of bodily attributes to intellectual or moral excellence " I assure you, my sweet friend, that a robust, strong body does not guarantee a virtuous and strong spirit, because the latter springs from a natural moral strength, a gift from God that He allows Nature to ingrain in certain rational creatures more than in others. It resides in one's mind or heart, certainly not in the strength of one's body or members" (Christine, 2018, p.48).

Traits construed as weakness are reinterpreted positively. Women's emotional responsiveness, for instance, can elicit compassion and moral engagement. Biblical narrative reinforces this statement: "If our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom no thought is hidden and who knows and sees into every heart, had thought that women's tears spring only from weakness and simplemindedness, His sublime dignity would never have allowed His own esteemed and glorious body to weep tears from compassion when he saw Mary Magdalena and Martha, her sister, weep over the death of their brother the leper, whom he resurrected" (Christine, 2018, p.40). Similarly, women's aptitude for childcare reflects not deficiency but a disposition toward care which arises from women's embodied capacity to nourish and sustain life, extending beyond maternal bonds, as illustrated by the example of a woman who breastfed her mother in prison to preserve her life (Christine, 2018, p.110). Physical difference, therefore, does not imply inferiority.

The alleged limitation of female intellectual capacity: Christine challenges the assumption that women's intellectual inferiority is natural. While experience suggests that women are less learned, this disparity results from social constraints rather than innate capacity. Lady Reason attributes it to the lack of educational opportunities: "If it were customary to send little girls to school and have them study the sciences as is customary for boys, they would learn and understand the subtleties of all the arts and sciences just as well as boys" (Christine, 2018, p.68).

The apparent deficit in knowledge stems from women's confinement to domestic role: "..since women have as much intelligence to comprehend and learn as men, why do they not learn more? ….. Because, my daughter, society does not consider it necessary for them to get involved in things that are left to men" (Christine, 2018, p.69). Equal education would yield equal achievement: "…God, who does nothing without a purpose, has wanted to show men that He doesn't disdain either the female sex or their own, since it has pleased Him to endow women's brains with the ability not only to learn and assimilate the sciences but also to discover new ones themselves" (Christine, 2018, p.80). Christine thus reclaims women's place within intellectual and historical discourse.

Female ontology: The refutation of misogynistic arguments reveals no rational basis for positing women as ontologically inferior. Christine consequently rejects the notion of a distinct "female nature" in essentialist terms: "It is beyond doubt that women are as much part of God's creature and the human race as men. They are not a different kind of species or breed that might justify their exclusion from moral teachings" (Christine, 2018, p.167). The issue is not the definition of an immutable essence but the relation between substance and condition. Christine's objective is not to propose a universal definition of women's nature, but rather to gain insight into the complexities of their interaction with the world.

The metaphor of gold illustrates this position: tested and reshaped, it retains its essence while increasing in value: "My dear girl, what happened to your common sense? Have you forgotten that gold proves itself in the furnace? It does not change its quality but increases in value the more it is beaten and fashioned in various ways! (Christine, 2018, p.23).

Does the human condition coincide with human nature? Can we consequently assert that women's activities and capacities do not constitute women nature? In this regard the implicit organizing principle of La Cité, says Richards, "shifts from the essentialist term *nature de femme* inherited from the scholastic

tradition and clerkly misogyny to a phrase used repeatedly throughout the poem that emphasizes the contingent identity of women (and by implication of men as well), *condicions de femme*. This implies that women's identities arise from their experience and from their historical conditions, not from some mysterious intrinsic female nature"(Richards, 1996, p. 108).

This perspective reframes the debate on women's nature. As Hope Johnston asks: "How can one earn respect for the sex if an accomplished woman can be redefined as unwomanly by token of her success?"(Johnston, 2012, p.442). Remarkable women who distinguished themselves in various fields, albeit by exhibiting characteristics typically associated with men. The essentialist framework, though ostensibly neutral, has historically justified hierarchy. Even when equality is admitted in principle, differences are interpreted to women's disadvantage (Johnston, 2012, p.442)

In my interpretation Christine proposes a complementary model: men and women share the same essence while differing in tendencies shaped by nature and circumstances. This suggests that an individual's circumstances whether cultural, historical or psychological can influence their identity and actions. These differences are not hierarchical but functional[1].

Autonomy against Consensus and Prejudice

In *The City of Ladies*, Christine does not merely contest misogynistic claims; she interrogates the very conditions that allow them to persist. What presents itself as "authority" is, upon examination, nothing other than the sedimentation of repeated assertions, sustained by reverence rather than reason. The near universality of misogynistic discourse—"hardly a scholarly book… that did not contain some chapter or lines criticizing women" (Christine, 2018, p. 22)—is not evidence of truth but of intellectual conformity. Consensus here functions as a mechanism of closure: it forecloses inquiry by converting opinion into doctrine.

Authority persists not because it is rational, but because it is believed: This diagnosis extends beyond learned discourse into the domain of social prejudice. The devaluation of daughters, the suspicion of women's speech, the attribution of moral and intellectual defects—these are not discrete errors but variations of the same failure: the abdication of judgment in favor of custom. When men lament the birth of a girl, Christine identifies not a cultural preference but a logical incoherence: "those who are worried… are extremely foolish" (Christine, 2018, p. 108). Each justification—economic burden, moral risk, filial ingratitude—is dismantled through counterexample and analysis. What appears as necessity reveals itself as projection. Christine examines avarice as another culturally imposed charge: "Just because women commonly take pleasure in collecting fabrics, thread, and other things that are useful in a household, they are called greedy" (Christine, 2018, p.183). The association of women with spinning and weaving exposes the economic dimensions underpinnings of such gendered accusations. As Richards observes, spinning with the distaff "filier a la quenouille, Christine's phrase- was not only mere domestic toil but a vital economic activity, and prohibitions in the *Corpus juris civilis* against women inheriting men's clothes aimed less at curbing cross-dressing than at denying them economic advantage (Richards, 2000). Behind the accusation of greed thus lies a deeper anxiety about women's social economic agency. Christine exposes

[1] In Christine's conceptualisation of humanity there are resonances of Thomistic ideas which were, in turn, based on the Aristotelian's assertion that gender differences were not essential. Even Aquinas, says Richards, had difficulties interpreting the nature of gender differences with respect to the universal nature of the human species because Aristotle from whom he took his cue, said that gender differences were not essential ones. Aquinas was forced by his logics to admit that women were not deficient with respect to the nature of the human species. See E. J. Richards, Rejecting Essentialism and Gendered Writing: The Case of Christine de Pizan," in Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages, hrsg. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 96-131.

this fear as a projection of structural inequality: women's apparent parsimony reflects material constraint, not moral failing. "Women are generally kept so short of money ", she writes, "that they zealously guard the little they have, because they know how difficult it is to acquire more" (Christine, 2018, p.183).

Prejudice, in this framework, is not ignorance alone but a structured misrecognition. The parable of the fool who believes himself a woman because others tell him so (Christine, 2018, p. 22) condenses this insight. Error persists not through force but through acquiescence.

Christine's critique thus converges on a single principle: the necessity of intellectual autonomy.This autonomy grounds her most decisive claim: the equality of intellectual capacity. If "an intelligent woman can do anything" (Christine, 2018, pp. 43, 69, 112), then the entire edifice of misogynistic thought collapses into contradiction. For if women were naturally inferior, their demonstrated achievements would be inexplicable; if they were without purpose, their existence would be absurd. Misogyny, in this light, is not merely unjust—it is irrational. Its endurance testifies not to its truth, but to the unexamined authority that sustains it.

Rewriting History: Autonomy from Patriarchal Narrative The same logic governs Christine's intervention in historiography. If authority in thought is maintained through repetition, authority in history is maintained through omission. The exclusion of women from the narrative of human achievement does not reflect absence but erasure. Christine's project is therefore reconstructive: she reintroduces women into history not as exceptions, but as constitutive agents. Her examples are neither ornamental nor anecdotal. When women, deprived of male leadership, assume political and military authority—"they would govern the country themselves… then they went to war" (Christine, 2018, p. 51)—the implicit claim is clear: competence is not gendered. Similarly, her inquiry into women's contributions to arts and sciences (Christine, 2018, p. 75) destabilizes the presumed equivalence between masculinity and knowledge. What has been taken as universal history is revealed as partial.

Yet Christine's revision operates on a deeper level. She expands the very criteria of historical significance. The labor of care—sustaining households, raising children, enduring hardship—is not external to history but foundational to it. "How fortunate it is that so many kind and loving daughters are born…" (Christine, 2018, pp. 111): such acts, though excluded from traditional accounts, constitute the conditions of social continuity. By restoring their visibility, Christine redefines history as a shared human practice rather than a record of male achievement. *The representation of* everyday acts of care by daughters and wives *in The City of Ladies marks a departure from the narrative of male-oriented history.* The seemingly ordinary labors of wives and daughters constitute the invisible infrastructure of history itself: "Think of how many good, upright women are viciously beaten without cause, suffer abuse, live in servitude… Not to mention those who starve and suffer with a house full of children while their husbands dawdle in sinful places or entertain themselves in every tavern in town… how fortunate it is that so many kind and loving daughters are born to parents!...They deserve high praise, as do similarly minded sons" (Christine, 2018, pp. 113). Christine's cyclical vision restores dignity to the female practices, positioning them as constitutive rather than supplementary to civilization. Women in *The City of Ladies* are exemplars of moral perseverance, embody a mode of being-in-time that resists erasure and affirms women's rightful place within the continuum of history.

At the same time, this historiographical reconstruction is not neutral. Christine's use of exempla is strategic: she selects, arranges, and at times reshapes inherited narratives to serve a philosophical end. Figures such as Semiramis—whose historical and legendary accounts are marked by moral ambiguity—are presented under a markedly favorable light. Semiramis is the first example, " the first big strong rock that I want you to lay for the foundation of your city". Christine explains and partially justifies the incest

of this queen who married her own son: " That was certainly an enormous transgression, but this noble lady deserves some consideration because there were no written laws in existence as yet and the people lived by the law of nature, which allowed everyone to do as they wished without fear of committing a sin" (Christine, 2018, p.50). This is not a naïve oversight but a deliberate reorientation. Where misogynistic tradition amplifies female vice to justify exclusion, Christine amplifies female virtue to counterbalance centuries of distortion. Her "correction" of history reveals that historiography itself is never a passive record but an interpretative act governed by purpose.

By demonstrating that historical narrative can be reorganized, she exposes its constructed nature. The question is no longer whether history is distorted, but by whom and to what end. Christine's intervention makes visible the criteria by which significance is assigned and character is judged. In doing so, she dislodges the apparent neutrality of patriarchal history and replaces it with a consciously articulated perspective.

Conclusion

This article approaches *The City of Ladies* as a consolatory feminist work, while recognizing that to designate Christine a "feminist" without qualification risks conceptual imprecision. If feminism is taken as concern for the female cause, its attribution here must be qualified: not as a movement-anachronistic in the medieval context- but as initiative of an individual thinker. Christine's project does not consist in the formulation of a doctrine of gender equality in the modern sense, but in a sustained *defense* of women through consolatory method: she restores women's dignity by reordering the terms through which they are judged—intellectually, morally, and historically. This defense is neither merely rhetorical nor apologetic; it is epistemic. By exposing the irrationality of misogynistic claims and countering them with reasoned exempla, she transforms consolation into critique. In this precise sense, her work is feminist in operation, not in designation.

This operation, however, does not amount to a simple degendering of knowledge. Christine does not dissolve sexual difference into neutrality; she reconfigures it. Her intervention is more accurately described as a *regendering*: she reassigns value to what has been denigrated, reinscribes women within the domains of knowledge and history, and thereby displaces the hierarchical coding of difference. Her reconstructed history tends toward a universal horizon—"God has never condemned, nor does He now condemn, either the female or the male sex" (Christine, 2018, pp. 96)—it does so not by erasure, but by redistribution of epistemic authority.

At the center of The *City of Ladies* lies a confrontation with authority itself. What presents itself as intellectual consensus is revealed as repetition without justification, sustained by reverence rather than reason. Against this, Christine posits a form of autonomy that is at once epistemic and ethical. One must not "accept the opinions of others rather than trust [one's] own feeling and experience" (Christine, 2018, p. 22). Christine is a humanist in the sense articulated by Mairhofer (2023): as a demand for the use of one's own reason against the inertia of inherited authority. To think, for Christine, is to resist the sedimentation of opinion—whether sanctioned by philosophers or embedded in social practice. The task of reason is to refuse acquiescence: to test, to distinguish, and ultimately to trust one's own capacity for judgment. This call anticipates, both temporally and substantively, later formulations of intellectual autonomy, the insistence that rational self-determination is the condition of truth.

Christine's enduring significance lies here: She does not simply oppose misogyny; she exposes the conditions of its intelligibility and dismantles them from within. What she offers is neither a system nor a doctrine, but a practice of thought: to resist authority when it is irrational, to interrogate consensus when it is ungrounded, and to assume the risk of thinking for oneself.

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