Christine de Pizan
1364–1430
Outline

• Life and works of Christine de Pizan
• The Question of Women
• Authorship and women in Medieval Europe
• “The Book of the City of Ladies”
Her Life

• Born in 1364 in Venice, Italy
• Father was astrologer of King Charles V in France
• Grew up in Paris in the King’s court
• Education similar to a man’s: studied Latin, philosophy, literature, the sciences
• Husband Etienne de Castel died
• She took care of her 3 children
• Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453): Entered a Nunnery for safety in 1418
Her Works
Vernacular Literature

Marie de France
Christine de Pizan
Dante Alighieri
Geoffrey Chaucer
Boccaccio
Misogyny?

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/
Misogyny (n.)

- 1650s, from Latin misogynia,

Dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.
“the contrary of misogyny is neither a corresponding negative generalization about men (which culturally would not produce the same effect) nor the love of all women (a pretense that is merely another form of misogyny), but something on the order of a perception of women as individuals, or the avoidance of general statements such as ‘Woman is…’ the effect of these speech acts on women is why the discourse of misogyny seems so repetitive, culturally constant, and lacks an internal history. Its purpose—is to remove individual women from the realm of events—depends upon the transformation of woman into a general category, which internally at least appears never to change.”
Querelle des femmes

“The Woman Question”:
• A literary debate about the nature and status of women.
• This debate began circa 1500 and continued beyond the end of the Renaissance.
“...women are by no means as fickle as some men claim, or as easily influenced in their behaviour. And if anyone tells me that books are full of women like these, it is this very reply, frequently given, which causes me to complain. My response is that women did not write these books nor include the material which attacks them and their morals. Those who plead their cause in the absence of an opponent can invent to their heart's content, can pontificate without taking into account the opposite point of view and keep the best arguments for themselves, for aggressors are always quick to attack those who have no means of defense. But if women had written these books, I know full well the subject would have been handled differently. They know that they stand wrongfully accused, and that the cake has not been divided up equally, for the strongest take the lion's share, and the one who does the sharing out keeps the biggest portion for himself.”
Detail of Christine de Pizan writing in her study, Book of the Queen, British Library, Harley MS 4431
Auctor (n.): the author or source of a right or title
Wheel of Fortune, Harley MS 4431
Christine de Pizan before the personifications of Rectitude, Reason, Justice in her study. She is helping another lady to build the City of Ladies, (Harley MS 4431)
L'histoire d'amour de

Il était une fois, dans un royaume lointain, un jeune prince nommé Romane. Son cœur était plein d'amour pour sa belle amie, Camille. Cependant, les parents du prince et de Camille étaient en conflit, refusant la possibilité d'un mariage entre eux.

Un jour, un messager des parents du prince vint demander l'argent nécessaire pour les noces. Le prince, désespéré, décida de se rendre à la forêt pour y trouver une solution. Il y rencontre un vieil homme, qui lui dit : "Tu es destiné à un grand destin, Romane. L'argent de ton futur épouse est dans un coffre caché dans la forêt. Cherche-le, et tout se fera selon tes désirs.

Le prince, déterminé, alla chercher le coffre et trouva la somme nécessaire. Il revint ensuite auprès de sa belle, qui était profondément émue par son geste. Ensemble, ils échangèrent leurs serments d'éternité et se promirent de vivre heureux pour toujours.

C'est ainsi que Romane et Camille, contre toutes attentes, réussirent à établir leur amour à travers les obstacles. Ils vécurent longtemps après, heureux et fervents dans leur amour si pur.
Christine presenting her manuscript to the Queen Isabel of Bavaria, France c. 1414, British Library Harley MS 4431
The Book of the City of Ladies published in France, 1405
Allegorical Elements

Reason, Rectitude, Justice
Christine stands in the hall of Fortune’s castle contemplating the scenes from ancient history that she then writes for her readers, *Staatsbibliotek*, Munich, folio 53.
Venus presiding over a group of men and women, who are presenting their hearts to her, Harley MS 4431
Queen Penthesilea with her army of Amazons on the way to aid the Trojan Army, Harley MS 4431
One day as I was sitting alone in my study surrounded by books on all kinds of subjects, devoting myself to literary studies, my usual habit, my mind dwelt at length on the weighty opinions of various authors whom I had studied for a long time. I looked up from my book, having decided to leave such subtle questions in peace and to relax by reading some small book. By chance a strange volume came into my hands, not one of my own, but one which had been given to me along with some others. When I held it open and saw its title page that it was by Matheolus, I smiled, for though I had never seen it before, I had often heard that like books it discussed respect for women. I thought I would browse through it to amuse myself. I had not been reading for very long when my good mother called me to refresh myself with some supper, for it was evening.
The Book of the City of Ladies

…But just the sight of this book, even though it was of no authority, made me wonder how it happened that so many different men - and learned men among them - have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior. Not only one or two and not even just this Matheolus (for this book had a bad name anyways and was intended as a satire) but, more generally, 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. Thinking deeply about these matters, I began to examine my character and conduct as a natural woman and, similarly, I considered other women whose company I frequently kept, princesses, great ladies, women of the middle and lower classes, who had graciously told me of their most private and intimate thoughts, hoping that I could judge impartially and in good conscience whether the testimony of so many notable men could be true.
Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, Brooklyn Museum 1979
From a 15th century manuscript in which Christine de Pizan is depicted presenting one of her works to the Queen. Perhaps it was her book.

Illuminated Capital for Christine de Pizan

Flame form to be stitched in cotton to resemble bargello. Interior scene to be stitched in silk.