

# 38 CHRISTINE DE PIZAN: WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

Christine de Pizan was born in Venice around 1365. (She died about 1431.) She lived most of her life in Paris, however, where her father had traveled to serve as physician and astrologer in the royal court. Christine married a university graduate and had three children, but her husband died young, leaving her to support her family. She chose the admittedly unusual course for that time—for anyone, but particularly for a woman—of making her living as a writer, earning support not from manuscript sales directly—though many copies were made of her principal works—but through patronage from noble families. She wrote the *Mirror of Honor: The Treasury of the City of Ladies* in 1405, partly as a guide to educating young women and partly to refute some recent writings that had been very derogatory toward women.

Current historians usually regard Christine de Pizan as something of a feminist, eager to demonstrate women's capacity in an age admittedly dominated by men. They acknowledge, at the same time, that (quite understandably, particularly for someone dependent on the support of others) Christine de Pizan carefully reflected dominant beliefs of the time in many ways—and there's no reason to think she did not accept most of them herself. Interpreting her work thus requires an understanding of the value systems of the time, as well as some criteria to assessing what "feminism" usefully conveys in premodern historical settings.

It is also important to look at this work in terms of how women may actually have lived—particularly those in the upper classes, about which Christine de Pizan was best informed. This involves some sense of daily activities and demands, and a larger evaluation of their power position in the household.

Finally, of course, Christine de Pizan deliberately evokes a clear social hierarchy. The document invites an assessment of how this hierarchy was defined, how the major groups differed from each other, and how the hierarchy was justified.

## MIRROR OF HONOR

Here is set forth the way the good princess, counseled by God, will decide to follow.

You must then decide which of these two ways you will follow. So the good princess inspired by God speaks to herself. Discretion truly is called the mother of Virtue. Why the mother? Because she conducts and leads, and the one who fails to

From Christine de Pizan, *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor: The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. C.C. Willard, tr. New York: Persea Books, 1989.

follow her finds that enterprises without her come to nothing and are worthless. Therefore, I must work discreetly. Why discretion? Before I undertake anything, I consider first of all the strength or weakness of my own body and my fragility. Then I weigh the demands I must balance in this human state to which God has committed me. Considering these things honestly, I know that however excellent my will, I have a very weak body for suffering great abstinence or intense pain, and a feebleness of spirit from that fragility and inconstancy. Knowing myself thus, I do not deceive myself into imagining that I am of such great virtue to act when God says, "You will leave father and mother for my sake." I could not. I could not leave husband, children, my worldly state, and all earthly preoccupations with the intention of serving God completely in the contemplative life, as the most perfect human beings have done. I must not try to do what I know would be inadequate for the demands.

What then should I do? Should I follow the active life? Happy are those who can fulfill its demands successfully. Good Lord, why didn't You create me poor, so that I could at least serve You more perfectly for love of You? I cannot leave everything to devote myself only to good work. Good Lord, advise me and inspire me! Tell me what I must do for salvation. Though I know well enough that I should not love or desire anything but You alone, and though I know all other joy is meaningless, still I don't find the strength in myself to relinquish the world completely. So I am troubled. For You say that it is impossible for the rich to be saved.

Holy Information then comes to the rescue of the good princess and says: "Here is what you will do. God does not insist that you leave everything to follow Him except for those who wish to devote themselves to a perfect life. Rather, each can save herself according to her own state. When God says that it is impossible for the rich to be saved, he means the rich without virtue; those who do not distribute their wealth in alms; those whose only pleasure is in their possessions. Truly God hates them, so they never will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

"Surely you can see this for yourself. Haven't there been kings and princes who now are saints in Paradise? Saint Louis and others like him did not abandon the world but rather reigned and governed their lands in a manner pleasing to God. Similarly, many queens and princesses now are saints in Paradise, such as Saint Elizabeth, the Queen of Hungary; and others. God doubtlessly is willing to be served by people of any estate. Any who wish it can be saved; for it isn't the position which brings damnation but not knowing how to use it wisely."

Therefore, since I conclude that I am not strong enough to follow either of these paths, at least I will try the middle way, as Saint Paul advises, and select from each path as much of the best as I am able.

#### WHEREIN IT IS EXPLAINED HOW THE GOOD AND WISE PRINCESS WILL ATTEMPT TO MAKE PEACE BETWEEN THE PRINCE AND HIS BARONS IF THERE IS ANY DIFFICULTY BETWEEN THEM

If any neighboring or foreign prince wars for any grievance against her lord, or if her lord wages war against another, the good lady will weigh the odds carefully. She will balance the great ills, infinite cruelties, losses, deaths, and destruction to property and people against the war's outcome, which is usually unpredictable. She will

seriously consider whether she can preserve the honor of her lord and yet prevent the war. Working wisely and calling on God's aid, she will strive to maintain peace. So also, if any prince of the realm or the country, or any baron, knight, or powerful subject should hold a grudge against her lord, or if he is involved in any such quarrel and she foresees that for her lord to take a prisoner or make a battle would lead to trouble in the land, she will strive toward peace. In France the discontent of an insignificant baron (named Bouchart) against the King of France, the great prince, has recently resulted in great trouble and damage to the kingdom. The *Chronicles of France* recount the tale of many such misadventures. Again, not long ago, in the case of Lord Robert of Artois, a disagreement with the king harmed the French realm and gave comfort to the English.

Mindful of such terrible possibilities, the good lady will strive to avoid destruction of her people, making peace and urging her lord (the prince) and his council to consider the potential harm inherent in any martial adventure. Furthermore, she must remind him that every good prince should avoid shedding blood, especially that of his subjects. Since making a new war is a grave matter, only long thought and mature deliberation will devise the better way toward the desired result. Thus, always saving both her own honor and her lord's, the good lady will not rest until she has spoken, or has had someone else speak to those who have committed the misdeed in question, alternately soothing and reproving them. While their error is great and the prince's displeasure reasonable, and though he ought to punish them, she would always prefer peace. Therefore, if they would be willing to correct their ways or make suitable amends, she gladly would try to restore them to her lord's good graces.

With such words as these, the good princess will be peacemaker. In such manner, Good Queen Blanche, mother of Saint Louis, always strove to reconcile the king with his barons, and, among others, the Count of Champagne. The proper role of a good, wise queen or princess is to maintain peace and concord and to avoid wars and their resulting disasters. Women particularly should concern themselves with peace because men by nature are more foolhardy and headstrong, and their overwhelming desire to avenge themselves prevents them from foreseeing the resulting dangers and terrors of war. But woman by nature is more gentle and circumspect. Therefore, if she has sufficient will and wisdom she can provide the best possible means to pacify man. . . .

#### WHEREIN IS DESCRIBED THE LIFESTYLE OF THE WISE PRINCESS ACCORDING TO THE ADMONITIONS OF PRUDENCE.

Prudence will suggest that the wise princess order her life according to such a regime as this. Rising early every morning, her first words will be addressed to God. She will pray: "Lord, keep me free this day from mortal sin, from sudden death, and from all misfortunes. So be it with my family and friends. Grant pardon to the dead. Grant peace and tranquility to our subjects. Amen." She would end with a Pater Noster and any additional prayers her devotion might suggest.

She will prefer not to surround herself with an elaborate morning service. Such was the habit of Good Queen Joan, formerly wife of King Charles V of France. During her lifetime she arose every morning before daybreak and lighted



her own candle to recite her Hours, thus not permitting her serving women to rise up and lose necessary sleep. When ready, the wise princess will go to chapel to hear morning Mass either as often as her devotion dictates or her time allows. The lady with great responsibilities in government has little time free from ruling. Lords often give over their rule to their ladies when they know them to be wise and good and when they themselves are obliged to be absent. Such women have enormous responsibility and authority to govern their lands and serve as council chief. These ladies should be excused even by God if they do not spend so much time in lengthy prayers as those with greater leisure. Certainly they merit no less for attending to the public good and welfare of all in their power than if they spent more time in prayer.

Of course, a lady might elect total dedication to the contemplative life, completely renouncing the active life. However, while that contemplative life can exist without the active, the active cannot endure without some portion of the contemplative. Therefore, the active lady leaving her chapel will personally, with humility and devotion, give alms with her own hands, showing by her actions that she does not despise the poor. Any requests for mercy or aid she will listen to kindly, replying graciously, and immediately attending to those which can be fulfilled. By so doing, she will enhance not only the gift but her own reputation. If time will not allow her to hear all the requests, she will refer the rest to virtuous men accompanying her who have been charged with listening to them and who by nature and character are charitable, efficient, and honorable.

After this, the lady who governs will go to her council on those days when it meets. There she will carry herself with such presence, such bearing, and such a countenance that, seated on her high throne of office, she will indeed appear to be the ruler of them all. Everyone will revere her as a wise mistress of great authority. She will listen diligently to all propositions and to the opinions of everyone present. Carefully remembering the principal points of each problem and the suggested conclusions, she scrupulously will note which members speak the best, with most due consideration, and which offer the finest possible advice. Then she will weigh the wisest, most lively, most honorable opinions. Naturally, she will consider the causes and reasons inspiring the speakers' diversity of opinions, instructing herself on the cause of each effect. When her own time comes for speaking or replying, her reasoning will be so wise that nothing could be further from simplicity or ignorance. Moreover, she will be informed in advance of what will be proposed in the council. Such preparation for important matters by wise advice will permit her to speak and act to her own advantage.

**HERE BEGINS THE DISCUSSION OF PRUDENCE'S PRINCIPAL TEACHINGS WHICH SHOULD BE OBSERVED BY EVERY PRINCESS WHO LOVES AND DESIRES HONOR. THE FIRST OF THESE CONCERNS HER ATTITUDE TOWARD HER LORD AND MASTER.**

The first of the rules is: A lady loving honor, or any woman in the estate of marriage, must love her husband and live with him in peace. Otherwise she already has encountered the torments of Hell, where storms rage perpetually. Although doubtlessly women of all sorts may love their husbands dearly, either they do not

know all of these rules or, because of their youth, do not know how to demonstrate their love. This lesson will teach them how.

The noble princess wishing to love according to the rules of honor will conduct herself toward her lord, whether he is young or old, in all ways expected for good faith and true love. She will be humble toward him in deed, word, and attitude. She will obey him without complaint and will keep her peace as punctiliously as did Good Queen Esther in the Bible's first chapter of her book, where her lord so loved and honored her that she had no wish he would not grant. The lady will show her love by lavishing care and attention on all matters pertaining to his welfare, that of his soul as well as of his body. In order to attend to his soul she will win the confidence of his confessor, to whom she can turn if she sees in her lord any indication of sin whose practice could lead to his perdition. She might hesitate to mention such frailty to her husband for fear of displeasing him; instead, she will have his confessor admonish him, begging him to serve Our Lord faithfully. And, when giving alms and doing good works, she always will say: "Pray God for my lord and me."

Parallel to her concern for her lord's soul is the lady's concentration on his bodily needs. She must assure that his health is maintained and his life preserved from threat. Therefore she will wish to talk frequently with his physicians, inquiring about the state of his health, sometimes being present at their consultations, and wisely heeding their opinions. Similarly, she will want to be sure her husband's servants serve him well. If need be, she will not hesitate to take personal charge, no matter who has been appointed to this duty. Because it is not customary for royal ladies to be in such close contact with their husbands as other women are with theirs, the lady frequently will inquire for information about him from chamberlains and others of his suite. She will see him as often as possible, always expressing joy at their meeting. In his presence she will show a joyful face and say things which she knows will please him.

#### WHICH SPEAKS OF ARTISANS' WIVES AND HOW THEY SHOULD CONDUCT THEMSELVES.

Now we must speak of the lifestyle of women married to the artisans who live in the cities and good towns, both in Paris and elsewhere. Of course, these women will find valuable the good advice already given to others if they so wish. However, although certain trades are more highly regarded than others (for instance, goldsmiths, embroiderers, armorers, and tapestry weavers are thought more distinguished than masons and shoemakers), we address the wives of all craftsmen. All of them should be attentive and diligent.

If they wish to earn money honorably, they should urge their husbands and their workmen to take up their trade early in the morning and leave it late. No trade is so good that if one is not hard-working one barely lives from one crust of bread to the next. Urging the others to action, she herself should put her hand to the task, making sure that she knows the craft so well that she can direct the workmen if her husband is not there and reprove them if they do not work well. She must admonish them against laziness; a master often is deserted by irresponsible, lethargic workmen. When her husband gets a commission for some difficult and

unusual task, she firmly must convince him not to accept any work through which he might suffer a loss. If he does not personally know his client, she should advise him to produce as little work as possible on credit. Several already have been ruined by this. Sometimes greed to earn more or the importance of the tendered offer tempts one to such risks.

The artisan's wife should keep her husband attracted to her by love, so that he will stay at home the more willingly, not tempted to join those foolish bands of young men in taverns and not likely to dissipate his earnings with superfluous, outrageous expenses, as many young artisans do, especially in Paris. Rather, treating him with tenderness, she should keep him nearby. Common wisdom has it that three things drive a man from his home: a quarrelsome wife, a smoking hearth, and a leaking roof.

Furthermore, she should be willing to stay home, not running here and there every day, gossiping in the neighborhood to find out what everybody else is doing, nor frequenting her cronies. All this makes for poor housekeeping. Neither is it good for her to go to so many gatherings across town, nor to go traveling off needlessly on pilgrimages, which invariably would cause unnecessary expense.

She also should encourage her husband to let them live within their income so that their expenses will not be greater than their earnings, which would force them into debt at the year's end. If she has children, she first should have them taught at school so that they will better know how to serve God; then she ought to have them apprenticed to some trade so that they can earn their living. For a great gift to one's child is knowledge, a skill, or a trade. Beyond these, the mother above all must protect the child from affectation and indulgence. These greatly discredit children of the good towns—and reflect badly on their fathers and mothers, otherwise expected to be the source of virtue and good habits.

#### WHICH SPEAKS TO THE WIVES OF LABORERS.

Now drawing close to the end of our discussion—for which the time has come—we will speak to the simple wives of village workers. For them it is hardly necessary to forbid expensive ornaments and extravagant clothes; for they are well protected from all that. Nevertheless, though commonly they are nourished with black bread, milk, bacon, and soup, their thirst quenched with water, and though they have heavy enough burdens to bear, still their lives often are more secure and better nourished than the lives of those seated in high places. Because all creatures, no matter what their estate, need instruction in living well, we wish these women to participate in our lessons.

Humble women living in the village, on the plains, or in the mountains! You often cannot hear what the church preaches about salvation except from your priest or chaplain in his brief Sunday instruction. If our lesson should reach your ears, remember it so that the ignorance which could mislead you will not hinder your salvation.

Know, first of all, that there is a single God: all powerful, completely good, just, wise, from whom nothing is hidden, and who rewards every being for good or evil according to what she deserves. He alone should be perfectly loved and served.

Wholeheartedly and willingly, as you love Him, you must be sure that you do not do unto your neighbors or others what you would not have them do unto you. You must admonish your husbands to do likewise. If working the land for others,



they must do it well and loyally, as if for yourselves. At harvest time, they should pay the master with wheat that has been grown on the land, if such is the agreement, and not mix in oats, pretending that nothing else was grown there, not hide the good ewes or the best rams at their neighbor's in order to pay the master with inferior animals, and not pretend that his best ones are dead by showing him the skins of other animals, nor pay him with the worst fleeces. Nor should they give the master a dishonest accounting of his carts or other property, nor of his poultry.

### WHICH SPEAKS OF THE SITUATION OF THE POOR.

We began with the rich, subsequently speaking to all classes of women; now we will end our work by addressing the poor, beloved by God yet despised by the world. We urge them to patience in hope of the promised crown after life.

Blessed poor, so called by the word of God in the Scriptures, awaiting the possession of Heaven merited by poverty patiently borne! Rejoice in that mighty promise of all-surpassing joy to which no other can compare. It is not promised to kings or princes or to the rich unless they can equal you in spirit, that is, if they are voluntarily poor, disdaining all riches and all worldly vanities.

Dear friends, beloved of God: Let our admonitions enter your understanding to remind you to protect yourselves against the arrows of impatience. They may prick you because of your various, overwhelming afflictions such as hunger, thirst, cold poor lodgings, helplessness, friendlessness, old age, illness without comfort, and, topping all, the world's deprecation, unkindness, and rejection of you as if you were not Christians at all but some other species of being.

Of course you are wounded by the world's despising you and casting you out. But for God's sake, consider how trivial are honors given to kings and rich men, now dead, in their lifetime. Such temporal rewards have caused the damnation of many who would have been far better off in your situation.

But if you accept your poverty, firmly trusting in God and not coveting things other than those which please Him, you can acquire more noble possessions and greater riches than a hundred thousand worlds can hold and these can endure forever. All things considered, if you know how to benefit from it, you have reason to praise God for the estate to which He has called you.

Good poor women, you should comfort your husbands with our advice and help one another. Poor widows, you must take comfort in God, awaiting the endless joy God will grant you.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is feminism a useful label for Christine de Pizan (understanding that it was not at all a term used at the time)? How would you define the more feminist aspects of her writings? How does she implicitly compare women with men?
2. Judging by this document, what were the principal results of Christianity for women? Did Christianity promote women's capacities compared to those of men?
3. How does Christine de Pizan compare with writers from other societies who offered advice to women—for example, Ban Zhao in China's classical period?

Do differences outweigh similarities, or vice versa? How would you explain the differences?

4. Many historians have argued that, overall, women's conditions were deteriorating in the later Middle Ages, compared to men's prerogatives. Does this document reflect any such trend? What other kinds of materials would be needed to assess this trend?
5. What kind of social hierarchy is implied by this document? How do Christine de Pizan's views of social hierarchy compare to her views about inequality between men and women?