

# Using biblical interpretation combined with anti-misogynist strategies : Christine de Pizan gives shrewd advice to highborn ladies in fifteenth-century Europe

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## Using Biblical Interpretation Combined with Anti-Misogynist Strategies: Christine de Pizan Gives Shrewd Advice to Highborn Ladies in Fifteenth-Century Europe

Court writer Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) was familiar with 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> century French court circles through her father's and husband's positions there. Widowed at a young age, she was forced to become the breadwinner for her family. She used what she had learned of life to equip women in her social milieu for life by writing advice manuals for ladies of different societal levels thinly disguised as courtly tales. She showed women how to become successful, effective, socially acceptable, and respected. And to give more familiarity and credibility to her suggestions she used, among others, the stories of biblical women as exemplars. However, as this essay will show, Christine did apply some manipulative manoeuvres in how she presented the biblical material in order to make it convey the understandings she desired.

### *Background and Education*

Christine de Pizan, who was born in Venice in 1364 and who died at about the age of 66, was an Italian–French late mediaeval author – about twenty years junior to Geoffrey Chaucer (1342–1400). She was one of the most notable women writers of mediaeval times and, while she is often described as an early feminist, I would prefer to characterise her in a more complex way. Certainly, she forcefully raised issues about the treatment of women by the men in their lives and in the descriptions of women in the popular literary works of her day.<sup>1</sup> However, she believed wholeheartedly in the *complementarity* of men and women – rather than in direct *equality*. She was well aware of the concept of the culture of separate spheres<sup>2</sup> and its constraining operation on the lives of women fixed in the societal roles of her times.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Chr. de Pizan: *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. R. Brown-Grant, London 1999, 1.8–9; T. Adams: Christine de Pizan, *French Studies* 71/3 (2017) 388–400, available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/knx129> (accessed January 15, 2019).
- 2 J. Wolff and J. Seed: *The Culture of Capital: Art, Power and the Nineteenth-Century Middle Class*, eds., Manchester 1988.
- 3 See the discussion in S.H. Rigby: *The Body Politic in the Social and Political Thought of*

She was first of all employed as a copyist – an accepted occupation for women of the time<sup>4</sup> – and then as a writer in a range of genres, taking these tasks as commissions in order to support her family. She was «an innovative lyric poet, composer of courtesy books, political theorist, and religious writer».<sup>5</sup> She was also able to think politically and discourse effectively on the nature of kingship, warfare and the generalities of government.<sup>6</sup> Christine was patently intellectually gifted in complex ways; she could turn her mind to write what she wanted to and convey her ideas and conclusions to her readers in a variety of genres. She firmly believed that all women could be equally capable if appropriately educated.<sup>7</sup>

Christine contended that the then current and widespread misogyny overt in written materials of all kinds – as in their daily lives – hindered women from becoming the best that they could be. She fully believed that if girls were educated in a similar way to boys they would develop the same intellectual skills and qualities as males – even if the women later deployed these acquired abilities in ways that more suited their lifestyles.<sup>8</sup> Her works were read mainly by women of the higher social orders, from Queen Isabeau through princesses, duchesses, countesses, and baronesses to the wives of rich merchants and traders, all the groups of women who would have been taught to read. Two of her books, *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, were particularly focussed on helping women succeed in life.<sup>9</sup> Other works included treatises on history, politics, and military science. As may be seen from the list

Christine de Pizan (Abridged Version), Part I: Reciprocity, Hierarchy and Political Authority, *Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes / Journal of Medieval and Humanistic Studies* 24 (2012) 461–483, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/crm/13136> (accessed January 15, 2019). See also K. Kopka: Christine de Pizan and Emily Dickinson: Feminine Power Through Textual Production, Berfrois, July 3, 2017, available at <https://www.berfrois.com/.../keith-kopka-on-christine-de-pizan-and-emily-dickinson/> (accessed January 15, 2019).

- 4 I. de Foix: Christine de Pizan and Her Noble Friends, [scholar76.tripod.com/christine7.htm](http://scholar76.tripod.com/christine7.htm) (accessed January 15, 2019).
- 5 Adams: Christine de Pizan (n. 1).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 de Pizan: City (n. 1), II.13.
- 8 de Pizan: City (n. 1), I.27, 33 *et passim*.
- 9 de Pizan: City (n. 1); Chr. de Pizan: *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or The Book of the Three Virtues* (Also known as *The Mirror of Honour*), translated and introduced by S. Lawson, London 1985.

below, she wrote mainly about social interactions and the customary mores governing them, exploring how a range of characters navigated the challenges they met. There are disquisitions on the role of love in life and the literature of the time and also a sharply addressed counterargument to the misogynistic views expressed in the courtly poem *The Romance of the Rose*. Though her work did not breach the repertoire of works read and discussed by males in scholarly circles and did not ultimately gain renown there, she nevertheless had powerful male patrons and protectors who collected her works.<sup>10</sup>

Her father, Tommaso di Benvenuto da Pizzano, was the court astrologer for France's King Charles VI (1368-1422) and Christine moved readily within aristocratic circles in France.<sup>11</sup> Tommaso was also a qualified physician, having graduated in Venice where he had also held a chair in Astrology. He encouraged his daughter to read widely and in several languages, both ancient and modern, and led her education into such spheres.

The French king, Charles VI, was widely regarded as something of a «mad» and failing ruler which brought his wife somewhat further than usual into the limelight. She, Isabeau of Bavaria, was – at the time – popularly seen as a spendthrift and irresponsible philanderer. But, recently, historians have re-examined the extensive chronicles of her lifetime, concluding that many elements of her reputation were undeserved and stemmed from the factionalism and misogynistic propaganda of the times.<sup>12</sup> The urge to combat those prejudices and false consciousnesses against women in general provided a key driver for Christine's writings. She was well enough known in European courts that several pictures of her in the presence of royalty and nobility survive as illuminations of manuscripts. Depicted on an illuminated parchment, Queen Isabeau received from Christine a copy of *The Book of the City of Ladies* (c. 1410-1414, written 1405), and Isabeau is the Empress referred to in that book.<sup>13</sup> A similar

10 Male readers and patrons included Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan; Henry IV of England; Jean, Duke of Berry (who obtained copies of most of her writings); Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy; Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris. See Law's introduction to de Pizan: *Treasure* (n. 9), 19-20.

11 de Pizan: *Treasure* (n. 9). In this volume, Dame Rectitude, Dame Reason, and Dame Justice refer to Christine by her forename only, which was a most unusual practice at the time.

12 de Foix: *Noble Friends* (n. 4).

13 Adams: *Christine de Pizan* (n. 1); [http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/images/arth\\_214images/manuscripts/15\\_century/presentation/christine\\_present.jpg](http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/images/arth_214images/manuscripts/15_century/presentation/christine_present.jpg) (accessed January 15, 2019).



illumination shows Christine presenting her later book, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, to the Dauphine, Margaret, Duchesse de Guyenne.<sup>14</sup> This volume, her «sequel» to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, was «strictly a guide to practicalities. Part etiquette book, part survival manual, it was written for women who had to live from day to day in the world as it was».<sup>15</sup>

Christine was remarkably well educated, especially for a woman of that time, and fully supported in her endeavours by her husband, Etienne de Castel, a notary and royal secretary, whom she had married when she was fifteen. Her father died in 1387 and her husband died in 1390, leaving her completely alone at the age of twenty-five to support her mother, her niece, and her three children.<sup>16</sup> Her range of knowledge was vast, especially in her awareness of the contents and meaning of a huge range of histories, myths, and legends about important, successful, or otherwise memorable, women in the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt. Even a cursory reading of her works makes this breadth of knowledge and reflection apparent; hence her power to fascinate modern readers as much as her original audiences. She was a successful and prolific writer – as may be seen from the table below.<sup>17</sup>

Date	French Title	English Title
1395	<i>Enseignements moraux</i>	<i>Moral Teachings</i>
1399	<i>L'Épître au Dieu d'amours</i>	<i>The Epistle to the God of Love</i>
1399-1400	<i>L'Épître de Othéa à Hector</i>	<i>The Epistle of Othea to Hector, aka: The Boke of Knyghthode</i>
1401	<i>Le débat sur le Roman de la rose</i>	<i>Epistles on the Debate of the «Romance of the Rose»</i>
1402	<i>Dit de la rose</i>	<i>Said of the Rose</i>
1402	<i>Cent Ballades d'amant et de dame</i>	<i>One Hundred Ballads of a Lover and a Lady</i>
1403	<i>Le chemin de long estude</i>	<i>The Path of Long Study</i>

14 [https://thefreelancehistorywriter.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/christine\\_de\\_pizan\\_presents\\_her\\_book\\_to\\_margaret\\_of\\_burgundy.jpg](https://thefreelancehistorywriter.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/christine_de_pizan_presents_her_book_to_margaret_of_burgundy.jpg) (accessed February 19, 2017).

15 de Pizan: *Treasure* (n. 9), 21.

16 *Ibid.*, 21.

17 Adams: *Christine de Pizan* (n. 1).

1403	<i>Livre de la mutation de fortune</i>	<i>Book of the Mutability of Fortune</i>
1404	<i>Le livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V</i>	<i>The Book of Deeds and Good Customs of the wise king Charles V</i>
1405	<i>Le livre de la cité des dames</i>	<i>The Book of the City of Ladies</i>
1405	<i>Le livre des trois vertus</i>	<i>(A Mirror of Honour) The Book of the Three Virtues, also known as: The Treasure of the City of Ladies</i>
1405	<i>L'avisio[n] de Christine</i>	<i>The Vision of Christine de Pizan</i>
1407	<i>Livre du corps de policie</i>	<i>The Book of the Body Politic</i>
1410	<i>Livre des fais d'armes et de chevalerie</i>	<i>The Book of Feats of Arms and Chivalry</i>
1413	<i>Livre de paix</i>	<i>The Book of Peace</i>
1418	<i>Epistre de la prison de vie humaine</i>	<i>Epistle of the Prison of Human Life</i>
1429	<i>Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc</i>	<i>The Song of Joan of Arc</i>

#### *Christine's Advice to Women*

Believing in the power of God and of the blessed rewards of Heaven for a good life and the fearful punishments of Hell for an evil life, Christine's writings taught that women should observe their religious duties and eschew extravagance, envy,<sup>18</sup> slander and indolence.<sup>19</sup> As may be noted from her writings, she did not particularly distinguish the social, relational, financial, political spheres of life, seeing rather their intertwining and her task to identify those links and connections that were peculiarly susceptible to manipulation – or improvement – by women.

In her writings, she divided women into two main groups: young unmarried (virgin) women<sup>20</sup> and women who were in charge of a household. She further divided the second group into women of royal descent, then women of high rank and societal position,<sup>21</sup> and, finally, women of the merchant and trading

18 de Pizan: *Treasure* (n. 9), I.2–7, II.5.

19 Ibid., II.7–8.

20 Ibid., III.5.

21 Ibid., I.2–23.

classes.<sup>22</sup> For each group she had specific advice and strategies that would ensure them success and a modicum of calm – if not actual happiness – in their daily endeavours.

She counselled that young virgins should be clean, prudent, obedient to their parents, modest, and chaste, and, while reading widely, should be protected from learning of follies and dissipation.<sup>23</sup> Such possible missteps, however, were not specified in nature nor their sources identified. Presumably, the adult readers of her day were well and truly familiar with what these missteps might entail. Here are samples of her advice to parents of young unmarried women:

Others, though, are dismayed because they're afraid of the danger that a young girl can be led astray by the wrong sort of people ... all the parents have to do is bring them up properly when they're little, with the mother setting them an example through her own respectable behaviour and good advice; though, if the mother has lax morals, she will hardly be an example for the daughter to follow... Daughters should be kept on a tight rein away from bad company and taught to fear their parents because bringing infants and children up strictly helps to establish good conduct in later life.<sup>24</sup>

And about the young women themselves:

So their speech must be good, simple and devout and not too garrulous, their clothing chaste and without any fripperies, their behaviour simple and courteous. They should display an expression of humility with the eyes lowered, and their speech should be kindly. It ought to be their joy to hear the Word of God and to go often to church.<sup>25</sup>

Christine returns to this matter later in the book and expatiates on how young virgins should comport themselves while waiting for their parents to arrange a suitable marriage for them:

If they are at celebrations, dances or assemblies, they should be sure to have a gracious manner and excellent conduct, because more people have their eyes on them there... They should not join the men too much, but always seek the company of their mothers or the other women ... It is a very ugly thing in a girl to be argumentative and to answer back, and she could lose her good name because of it, thanks to the false and lying reports that household servants often make ... She must not allow a man to touch her on whatever pretext, nor to touch her with his hands in a playful manner,

22 Ibid., III.8.

23 Ibid., II.36.

24 Ibid., II.7 (abridged).

25 Ibid., III.5.

nor to joke with her too much for that would be very harmful to the respectability and good reputation that she ought to have.<sup>26</sup> ... she ought to take good care that no one should ever see her affected by having drunk too much wine, for if she had such a fault, nothing good would be said of it.<sup>27</sup>

The final clause indicates something of Christine's slyness in persuading any rebellious, or even reluctant, young woman to give her words more heed than they would otherwise consider doing. She does not go so far as to specify the gossip that would ensue from any who saw the young woman stagger or reel. But anyone reading this piece of advice can almost hear the words of the tattlemongers, perhaps whispering «no better than she should be,» a modern phrase that carries but does not actually verbalise hints of lewdness or debauchery.

Christine also knew well that marriage did not necessarily lead the young virgin to a better life. Christine understood that women in charge of a chateau or other massive dwelling complex led a hugely busy life that absorbed all their time, concentration, energy, knowledge and charm for long hours every day, often in the public eye:

... the wise princess ... will arrange her life principally in two areas. The first will be concerned with the manners and behaviour that she wishes to practise, and the second with the order of living that she will wish to establish ... as for the behaviour ensuing from the above ... one is sobriety and the other is chastity.<sup>28</sup>

She described the intensity of a princess's life:

She will arise quite early every day and address her first words to God ... She will go to hear her Masses ... as she leaves her chapel there will be some poor people at the door to whom she herself with humility and devotion will give alms from her own hand ... If she perhaps cannot consider all the requests that are made to her, certain gentlemen will be appointed to hear them ... she will go to the council on the days when it is held ... she will have her midday meal ... if there are any ladies or damsels or other visitors around her, then she will receive each of them in such honour as is fitting so that everyone will feel contented ... After the spices have been taken and it is time to retire, the lady will go to her chamber where she will rest for a short while if she feels the need to ... Then afterwards, if it is a weekday and she has no other more important occupation with which to avoid idleness, she will take up some work,<sup>29</sup> and

26 Ibid., III.5.

27 Ibid., III.5 (abridged).

28 Ibid., II.10 (abridged).

29 This would probably be needlework of some sort, dressmaking, mending, embroidery,

she will have the women and girls around her work similarly ... until the hour of vespers, when she will go to hear them in the chapel ... After doing this, if it is summer, she will go off to amuse herself in a garden until supper-time ... At bedtime she will pray to God ... As for other amusements; like going hunting ... we leave them to the preference and desire of their husbands and themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Christine recognised that some of these women might suffer indignities, neglect, or physical harm from their spouses, few women being as fortunate as Christine had been in her marriage. And to those women in unhappy or brutal marriages Christine offered the following advice in *The Book of the City of Ladies*:

As for you ladies, who are married, don't despair at being so downtrodden by your husbands ... Those wives with husbands who are wayward, sinful and cruel should do their best to tolerate them. They should try to overcome their husbands' wickedness and lead them to a more reasonable and respectable path, if they possibly can. Even if their husbands are so steeped in sin that their efforts come to nothing, these women's souls will at least have benefited greatly from having shown such patience. Moreover, everyone will praise them for it and will be on their side.<sup>31</sup>

In *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Christine pursued the matter at greater length and in more depth and detail. For women whose husbands proved extremely difficult to deal with she wrote far lengthier and more explicit advice and pertinent if, at times calculated, strategies:

Suppose that the husband, of whatever class he may be, has extremely perverse and rude behaviour. Suppose he is unloving towards her or strays into a love affair with some other woman. If the wife cannot remedy the situation, she must put up with all this and dissimulate wisely, pretending that she does not notice it and that she truly does not know anything about it. As a prudent woman, she will think, «if you speak to him harshly you will gain nothing, and if he leads you a bad life you will be kicking against the spur; he will perhaps leave you, and people will mock you all the more and believe shame and dishonour, and it may still be worse for you». ... Having considered these things, the wise lady will go to some trouble to keep his interest by being pleasant and kind ... she will bring it up sweetly when they are alone together. Sometimes she will admonish him out of devotion, at other times out of the kindness that she owes him, and at other times while smiling, as though she were making a joke

tapestry work, or some such employment of the hand and eye.

30 de Pizan: Treasure (n. 9), II.11 (heavily abridged).

31 de Pizan: City (n. 1), III.19.

of it ... She will not be able to endure hearing anything bad said of him, and so she will not care for gossips to report anything about him.<sup>32</sup>

Such a wifely response may seem totally false and deceitful but it is clear that the pacific route will be a means of avoiding stirring up irredeemable discord. There is always the possibility that the husband may very well appreciate the benefits of a calm, comfortable, and well-run home even if he chooses to play the field when not at home.

Christine clearly recognises that marriage is a power relation and she makes it plain that the powerless partner, the wife, will gain nothing by striving for dominance but must be seen to be of a healing or mellowing disposition, making sure – at least – that matters cannot worsen between her and her husband. The woman must resist the urge to complain about her husband's behaviour to others and must refuse to listen to others' complaints about him, even if she would like very much to agree with them and gain a sympathetic hearing however spurious such might turn out to be.

Further, if the woman had to deal with relatives of her husband who constantly exacerbated already difficult situations, causing even more strife between the spouses, she gave additional advice so that these relatives could be dealt with as circumspectly as possible:

She will honour them and make them all very welcome when they come to visit, and when other people are present she will honour her husband's family more than her own. She will intervene on their behalf with her husband if the need arises, and if there should be any dispute between them she will do her utmost to make peace. She will speak well of them and praise them, She will not allow herself to be drawn into arguments, and in every way she will avoid as far as possible any contention or rancour arising between her and them.<sup>33</sup>

It is plain from the list of unpleasant circumstances Christine describes along with the carefully phrased and subtle responses necessary that the wives must be completely ready to fend off a range of acrimonious situations that Christine fully expects them to encounter. The phrase «when other people are present» draws attention to Christine's slyness in the advice given here. All the wife's actions and speeches must be carefully crafted so that if they are re-

32 de Pizan: *Treasure* (n. 9), I.12 (abridged).

33 *Ibid.*, I.13.

membered and remarked upon by the relatives or by any others present, then nothing but politeness and welcome will be discernible in the woman's words. On other occasions, perhaps in private with those she trusts or within her own family circle, it appears that the wife could be free to prefer her own relatives and make her preferences and antipathies known should she wish to do so and give voice to her elsewhere suppressed rants against the vile, selfish and hurtful behaviours she has had to stomach.

Christine also recorded separate sections of guidance for women who were baronesses. She notes that of all the ranks of society the baronesses could have wealth and property in their hands almost as rich and extensive as the higher ranks of nobility, although some baronies were much smaller and held less significance in society. She guides women of this rank as follows:

...the power of some barons is very great because of their lands and lordship and the nobility that they have thereby. The wives of these men have very high rank, and as for the discipline of these ladies, it especially behoves them to be in general more prudent and wiser than other women. We must explain how to increase their knowledge so that they may know how to understand everything ... *It is also fitting for her to have the spirit of a man.* This means that she ought not to be educated entirely indoors, not only the great feminine virtues.<sup>34</sup>

Christine notes that it is often the duty of a baron to travel abroad and to bear arms while his lady remains at home and takes charge of all the matters of his estate. Here, particularly, she identifies the need for a state of mind and experience of education similar to that of men. She depicts a baroness as an indomitable woman, not at all afraid to learn of the weapons and hard choices of command and of fighting:

Her men should be able to rely on her for all kinds of protection in the absence of their lord... She should be well informed about and apprised of the legal aspects and the local customs, and which things should be phrased carefully if there is need for great tact towards those who would wish to do her harm or who are somewhat rebellious or unco-operative. She should be kind, humble and charitable towards the good and obedient ones ... she should know how to use weapons ... ready to command her men if the need arise ... She should take care that her fortresses are well garrisoned.<sup>35</sup>

34 Ibid., II.9 (emphasis mine).

35 Ibid., II.9.



Readers will note that Christine here envisages a somewhat different calibre of women than that of those who live at court. She warns them well of what responsibilities might well fall to their shoulders, for as well as the normal supervising and arranging of provisioning and outfitting of her dependants, she must also be able and willing to lead «her» men in the way her husband would were he at home. These women are expected to fulfil both gender roles in times of need.

Addressing the women of the merchant and trading classes in the cities, realising that some of them were among the richest and most finely clad in the land, she asks these women to render more obedience to the sumptuary laws of the times and to restrain their conspicuous consumption of fine fabrics, furs, and gemstones.<sup>36</sup> In response to an extravagant overspend she had this to say about a lying-in chamber:

Now, before one entered her chamber, one passed through two other very fine chambers, in each of which there was a large bed well and richly hung with curtains. In the second one there was a large dresser covered like an altar and laden with silver vessels. And then from that chamber one entered the chamber of the woman in childbed, a large and well-appointed room hung from floor to ceiling with tapestries made with her device<sup>37</sup> worked very rich in fine Cyprus gold.<sup>38</sup>

The description of the bedchamber continues in this highly luxurious vein and readers readily recognise Christine's distaste for the extravagance displayed and, perhaps, also for the most certain reversal ensuing during the birthing process, when, unless replaced by simple linens and clean rags, these sumptuous soft furnishings would become ruined.

#### *Christine's Fondest Hopes for Women*

Reading through her works one comes to recognise that Christine believed that her writings might well provide an important counter voice in favour of women's education, self-esteem, agency, and sense of equal importance against the widespread background of confirmed misogyny evident in literature, custom, tradition, and long usage, let alone enshrined in laws and in public and private practice. Her account of the young woman, inappropriately dressed for child-

36 Ibid., III.3

37 Her coat of arms, now quartered with her husband's arms.

38 de Pizan: Treasure (n. 9), III.3.



birth in «crimson silk cloth»<sup>39</sup> seems to point also to a condemnation of the common practice of keeping upper-class young women in ignorance of what will come upon them as they labour to bring forth a child and of the apparently overweening necessity of luxurious display at all times.

What Christine really wanted for *all* women was that they become *clever*, *successful*, and, above all, *blameless*. She was aware of how any evidence of indiscretions or sly dealings by women could be crafted into justification to regard as right and proper the harshly controlling attitudes that the misogynist atmosphere promulgated in, for example, *Le Roman de la Rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*), a thirteenth-century courtly poem written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.<sup>40</sup> Hence came her draconian strictures regarding the upbringing of young women and her somewhat *slyer* advice to married women of high social standing. All the women she envisages as acting independently in their own lives *must* follow her guidance, using tact and carefully selected comments; everything they said and did must be perfectly polite and decorous, even if compounding many polite lies and fictions about their spouses and households, if they wished to remain *blameless* in society's eyes.

Yet, Christine wanted to add yet another level to the accolades she wished to be attached to women. She wished them to become, and remain, *blamefree*. This adjective adds the dimension of what is thought, said, and written about women whether in the private or public spheres. It was all well and good for women to live blameless lives but if other people – actually, usually men – did not believe them to be *blameless* and did not accord them that attribute in all their comments oral or written, then their blamelessness gained them very little other than a great deal of personal effort. NO: the women must both be held to be *blameless* and, hence be denoted *blamefree* – somewhat as Christine saw the Apocrypha's Susanna regarded after her triumph over the calumniat-

39 Ibid., III.3.

40 In *Le Roman de la Rose*, a male lover seeks to «deflower» his beloved Rose. Jean de Meun's expansion of Guillaume's poem is filled with crude sexual imagery and misogynistic stereotypes about women's alleged immorality. See the discussion in J. Morton: *Le Roman de la Rose*, *French Studies* 69/1 (2015) 79–86, available at <https://academic.oup.com/fs/article/69/1/79/2962638> (accessed January 15, 2019), and also pages and comment on the ca. 1505 copy of the poem begun in c.1225-40 and completed by c.1270-7, held in the Special Collections Department, Library, University of Glasgow, email: [special@lib.gla.ac.uk](mailto:special@lib.gla.ac.uk). Christine objected to Jean de Meun's portrayal of women in the poem. See Christine de Pizan et al: *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. D. F. Hult, Chicago 2010.

ing elders. Readers should appreciate the subtle difference between these two terms. *Blameless* is a condition of the innocent person attributed to that person by herself and, perhaps – but not certainly – by others also. *Blamefree* operates from the perspective of the other; outsiders or observers state that the person is *blamefree*. Additionally, «blamefree» refers to being free of innuendo, rumours, gossip, or false reports, which could attach to a woman – however innocent – if she was seen in the wrong company or gave even the slightest impression of impropriety. For a woman to escape censure in Christine’s world both adjectives are necessary.

Christine retells Susanna’s story as follows:

The Holy Scripture mentions so many excellent and chaste ladies who preferred to die rather than lose their chastity, bodily integrity and good conscience. One such lady was the virtuous and lovely Susanna, wife of Joachim, who was a very rich and influential member of the Jewish race. As this honest lady was walking in the garden one day, she was approached by two old men, corrupt priests, who tried to tempt her into sin. Seeing that she completely rejected their advances and that their pleas were getting them nowhere, they threatened to denounce her in court for having been found with a young man. On hearing their threats, and knowing that the punishment for an adulterous woman was to be stoned, she exclaimed, «I am caught on all sides, for if I refuse to do what these men want, my body shall be put to death. But, if I give in to their demands, I shall be committing a sin in the eyes of the Creator. However, I would rather be innocent and suffer death than risk rousing God’s anger by sinning.» Susanna therefore screamed out loud and the other members of her household came running ... the corrupt priests managed to convince the court with their false testimony and Susanna was sentenced to death.<sup>41</sup>

Christine shows by how she presents Susanna’s inner turmoil that Susanna understood well both the actions that were necessary to achieve blamelessness and those that would allow her to be seen as blamefree. Susanna knew how to achieve the first but could do nothing by herself to achieve the second. Christine continues her story:

Yet God, who always looks after His own, opened the mouth of the prophet Daniel, who was just a small child in his mother’s arms: when the boy saw Susanna being led to her punishment, followed by a great crowd of people whom were all weeping, he cried out that the innocent woman had been wrongly accused. She was taken back to court where the corrupt priests were properly cross-examined and found guilty by

41 de Pizan: *City* (n. 1), II.37.

their own confessions.<sup>42</sup> The blameless Susanna was saved and it was they who were punished instead.<sup>43</sup>

Christine makes plain that the declaration of Susanna's innocence was made in a court and before a crowd of witnesses. She had been declared both *blameless* and *blamefree*, achieving Christine's twin ideals.

All through her writings it was clear that Christine wanted women to apply the strategies that she taught both effectively and successfully such that they would be accorded respect and dignified co-operation as they carried out their daily and familial duties.

Regarding *cleverness* and *success*, Christine knew that the «ladies» of the upper and middle classes in her day had to run the mediaeval home like a complex business and needed all their wits about them.

Christine summarised the responsibilities laid on those women under four headings – after the first important duty of their good behaviour and devoutness before God – namely,

the love and faith that you ought to have for your husbands and how you ought to conduct yourself towards them. The second point is the government of your household. The third concerns your grooming and clothing. The fourth is how you may avoid blame and dishonour.<sup>44</sup>

Again, Christine's twofold use of the word «ought» in the first requirement indicates that she knows very well that such ideals will not *always*, or even, perhaps, *often* be the case in real life; however, the wife of the household must do her best to run a well regulated home and must hide or dissemble about any flaws in the education, behaviour, dress, speech, and actions of all her dependants. The details laid out describing the steps the wife must take to ensure the good governance of her household range from ensuring the proper storage of all provisions and the appropriate allocation of them «with good discretion and right priorities without too much parsimoniousness.»<sup>45</sup>

So, successful women maintained good working relationships both with those of lower estate in their household and community and also with the

42 Daniel's questioning of the two separately showed they had not made sure that they told the same story in their evidence (*Susanna and The Elders* vv. 44-64).

43 de Pizan: City (n. 1), II.37.

44 de Pizan: Treasure (n. 9), III.1.

45 Ibid., III.1.

merchants and tradespeople who furnished the necessities of life and kept her property in good working order. Hence she was required to supervise the following multifarious aspects of maintaining a household in good condition: preparation of food; the serving of food; the cleaning and orderliness of the whole house; the teaching and disciplining of her children; the containment of the children's associated servants and mess within the designated apartments to the degree possible; the care of her husband's clothes; and the provision of a quiet space for him either to eat or take his ease when he returned home.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding the apparel of the lady of the house, Christine believes that it should «not be extravagant, either in the cost or in the fashions» and she gives five reasons in support of this demand: to avoid vanity with respect to one's own body (a sin), that showing off in that manner does not produce esteem but rather the opposite, that it is a way of wasting money, that it is a bad example to others, and that it may provoke the sin of envy in another woman.<sup>47</sup>

So, in her writings, Christine advised women on how to maintain a clean, neat, appropriate, discreet, and calm manner with all the people at whatever level that she encountered during her life and how, in particular, to manage difficult encounters or relationships. Her advice, in those cases, reveals shrewd – if time-consuming – means of manipulating events and persons otherwise inimical to a woman's smooth and successful life career; it is here that we see her at her subtlest. The woman is quite clearly «responsible» for the perfect running of the household's affairs and liable to blame if flaws appear anywhere in the complex organisation.

But when, and how, did she expect those chaste and sheltered young women to be successful arrangers of their mature households and families? She seems to be silent on those matters, unless she expects every betrothed woman to be given copies of her works and the freedom and encouragement to adopt similar positions and stances. In my view, her husband's attitudes to women's education and spheres of action were highly atypical of the times, but highly to be recommended, of course.

Taking another approach to understanding the purpose of Christine's writing endeavours, Jill E. Wagner suggests a different core to Christine's thinking. She believes that Christine focusses on the defence of women in every

46 Ibid., III.1.

47 Ibid., III.2.

aspect and sphere of her thinking and writing.<sup>48</sup> Particularising this insight, de Foix characterises Christine's work as providing a defence<sup>49</sup> against misogyny which is allegorised in the *City of Ladies* as muck or dirt that must be cleared away before building the safe spaces for the ladies inside the city.<sup>50</sup> Rather than think of the City as a haven or a sort of Beguinehof (enclosure for religious women called Beguines), my preference is to regard it merely as another place, a more sensibly defined and welcoming place where women no longer have to constantly act around men or react against them but merely pursue their own interests without barriers or hindrances.

Christine certainly writes persuasively to all her varied readers, drawing them to her point of view by the subtle structure of her arguments and by adducing familiar images that will lead to others accepting her arguments and points of view. In a confidence artist we would decry such an approach but elsewhere we accept it. William Beeman has described this skill as «being *zerang* or adroit in manipulating others' perceptions of the framing of the conversation and situation.»<sup>51</sup> Beeman further notes that «the exercise of *zerangi* should be clearly understood not to be operative only in situations of self-interest and may often incorporate aspects of true altruism.»<sup>52</sup> There clearly persists a measure of ambiguity in the motives of any person using those skills.

As readers will well imagine, Christine's supporters saw, and nowadays see, her altruism – at least for the lives and status of women – well evidenced in her writings, and in her discourses on the complementarity of male and female roles it is clear that she believed that ameliorating the situation of women in society would have the clear benefit of improving the lot of everyone in the society. She makes no mention of any loss in power or authority that might accrue to men if her ideas were put into practice so it could be possible to accuse her of dodging that particular thorny issue. As has been made plain, Christine

48 J.E. Wagner: Christine de Pizan's *City of Ladies*: A Monumental (Re)construction of, by, and for Women of All Time, *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 44/1 (2008) 69-80. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/1536-8742.1710> (accessed January 15, 2019).

49 de Pizan: *City* (n. 1) I.3.

50 de Foix: *Noble Friends* (n. 4).

51 W. Beeman: *Language, Status and Power in Iran*, *Advances in Semiotics*, Bloomington IN 1986, 28. Beeman benefits from the complexity of the grammar of Farsi that reveals where such skills are brought into play.

52 Beeman: *Language* (n. 51), 29.

is well aware of how the framing and wording of an argument or response can greatly affect the outcome of the matter under discussion. The creation of the appropriate scenario in the mind of one's interlocutor – whether the imagined scenario be true and relevant or false and misleading – is a vital stage in taking control of the discussion and driving the discussion towards one's desired outcome. Creating a «false scenario» is the «stock in trade» of any successful manipulator of others whether diplomat or trickster and Christine evidently knows this very well because that is what she instructs her readers regarding how to frame any discourse around contentious matters.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Christine's Use of Biblical Women*

In one of her teaching styles of discourse, Christine made use of the stories of biblical women.<sup>54</sup> Christine adapted the biblical stories and her interpretations thereof to match what she believed would best represent «true» womanhood, in her estimation, namely cleverness, success, and blamelessness. Hence, she used the biblical stories to support her opinions of how best to combat the misogyny of her times but that meant she had to suppress or omit those parts of the stories of the biblical women that might be considered deceitful in order to keep hold of her chosen line of argument.<sup>55</sup>

In *The Book of the City of Ladies* Christine wrote of Sarah, Rebekah, Thermutis (as Josephus named Pharaoh's daughter who rescued Moses from the Nile), Ruth, Esther, Judith, Susanna, «Our Lady's sister,» and Mary Magdalene.

Regarding Sarah,<sup>56</sup> Christine eulogises her great beauty and chastity in spite of the lustful approaches of several important men and recounts, in particular, the story of Sarah's temporary stay in Pharaoh's harem,<sup>57</sup> from which she was released following the affliction of Pharaoh and his servants with dreadful diseases and, Christine adds (though the Bible does not), the torturing of

53 See also S. McCornack: *Information Manipulation Theory*, Communication Monographs 59 (1992) 1-16; E. Goffman: *Frame Analysis*, New York, 1974; B. Peterson: *People Who Play God: How Ultra-Authorities Enslave the Hearts, Minds and Souls of Their Victims*, Philadelphia 2003.

54 She also uses extensively the stories of famous women of myth and legend from the ancient world in *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

55 There would have been a couple of versions of the Old Testament available to Christine at the time but it may safely be assumed that the underlying translation used was the Vulgate.

56 de Pizan: *City* (n. 1), II.38, Christine uses the name Sarah, not Sarai.

57 Genesis 12.



their minds with terrible visions. In this description, she is fairly faithful to the biblical account but she – perhaps determinedly – ignores the possible ambiguities in Abraham’s role that might undermine her point, namely his lying about Sarah’s relationship to him in case he might be murdered to make her – as a widow – readily available to Pharaoh. Christine also and perhaps more culpably ignored the import of Pharaoh’s gift of large numbers of domestic animals to atone for the time Sarah did spend in the Pharaoh’s harem. She accepts the words of the text that Pharaoh’s recognition of the dreadful sin he had «almost» committed was what led him to shower Abraham with the ancient equivalent of liquid capital, not, readers note, that Pharaoh might actually have, in fact, committed the sin and was possibly offering recompense. Sarah’s main actions as told in the text are actually inactions and/or resistance to subliminal (or unrecorded overt) advances by other men. Nevertheless, or merely because of that resistance, Sarah remained *blameless*, thus matching Christine’s ideal.

In her discussion on Rebekah,<sup>58</sup> Christine again refers to the character’s beauty, chastity, uprightness, humility, and modesty that led her husband Isaac to revere and cherish her to the greatest degree. Furthermore, she notes that God also favoured her by providing her with twins when she was old and, by the usual norms, past childbearing age. However, she does not make any mention of Rebekah’s deceiving of Isaac to gain the firstborn son’s blessing – from the rightful recipient, Esau – for her favourite, Jacob. This reads more of special pleading than of merely selective reading as might be said of her depiction of Sarah, above. From the way Christine wrote and dealt with the issues of manipulation in marriage, she must have been aware of Rebekah’s manipulation of Isaac through his sensory deficiencies and, yet, she chose to apply the same sleight of hand in her re-telling of Rebekah’s actions here. Readers familiar with the worldly-wise and downright sly advice that Christine was willing to give to wives, can certainly disabuse themselves of the belief that Christine did not realise what she was deliberately avoiding in her re-telling of Rebekah’s involvement here. Christine wanted to paint a fine picture of Rebekah for other women to follow, so she tailored her material to fit her purposes. Rebekah «became» *blameless* in Christine’s retelling though perhaps she would not be in another’s reading of the story.

58 de Pizan: City (n. 1), II.39.

In her response to the story of Thermutis, Christine notes that the baby was miraculously unable to feed from «a woman who was not of his own faith» hence requiring a Hebrew as wet nurse.<sup>59</sup> This is a strange comment about a baby's feeding choices, but she truly majors on the role women – such as Thermutis – have played in bringing good into the world. Thermutis is an exemplar of Christine's ideal upper class woman: thoughtful, capable and taking fully appropriate actions: «As soon as she saw it was a baby, the most beautiful baby that was ever seen, she was overjoyed. She had him looked after and brought him up as her own son.»<sup>60</sup>

Dealing with Ruth,<sup>61</sup> Christine apostrophises her decency and her loyal behaviour as a wife and widow, noting particularly that a whole biblical book was devoted to telling of her chaste and worthy life. Surprisingly, to me, she says very little about Ruth herself although she does «give» her some control of her own actions in what she says about her. Ruth is the subject of six verbs in the very short paragraph devoted to her: three times of the verb «to be» and three active verbs (left, spend, went). Christine tells her whole story about Ruth in one rather short paragraph:

I could tell you much more about the fine untainted women mentioned in the Holy Scripture, but I'll have to keep my comments brief. Ruth, another noble lady, was the ancestor of the prophet David. She was extremely chaste, both in marriage and in widowhood, being greatly attached to her husband. This was apparent, when on his death, she left her people and her native land to go and spend the rest of her days with the Jews, the race to which her husband had belonged. She even went to make her home with her mother-in-law. In short, this worthy lady was so decent and virtuous that a whole book in the Bible was devoted to her and her life, in which all these things are recounted.<sup>62</sup>

It is notable that Christine tells very little of the story of Ruth as it is recounted in the Bible, although she does make reference to two of the most well known of the features of the story, namely that Ruth was a foreigner, actually a Moabite, and that she left her own country and family to journey to Bethlehem to live with Naomi there. But Christine manufactures the detail of Ruth's great attachment to her husband since all that is known of him from the text is his name, Mahlon (Ruth 4:10).

59 Ibid., II.30.

60 Ibid., II.30.

61 Ibid., II.40.

62 Ibid., II.40.



Even stranger to modern-day women readers might be the fact that Christine makes no reference at all to the sequence of manipulative moves made against Boaz by Ruth.<sup>63</sup> These manoeuvres – instigated by Naomi – and not quite amounting to deception and seduction do, finally, lead to Ruth’s marriage to this rich citizen of Bethlehem. However, there is a little bit of a hiatus in the text at the end of the description of the nighttime incident on the threshing floor. For, although the words of Boaz in the text when he awakens with a startle to find Ruth snuggled by his feet on the threshing floor seem innocent enough, they do hint at some gossip already occurring.<sup>64</sup> However, as Josette Wisman notes: «Christine infers that Ruth was chaste,»<sup>65</sup> since Christine describes Ruth as «quite chaste during her marriage as well as during her widowhood.»<sup>66</sup>

Boaz begins by taking pains to utter some complimentary words about her loyalty and chastity and then follows them with the awkward intrusion of «for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman» or as a modern gossip might put it, «everyone knows you are a good girl». And we can certainly hear the mumbled rumours in the background asking, «And what else does everyone know?»

Christine avoids completely any discussion of Ruth’s subsequent marriage to Boaz and of the means by which it was effected. Christine’s Ruth is both *successful*, *blameless* and – textually – *blamefree*, but rather less of a character than she is in the biblical account.

In a longer section devoted to Esther, Christine states that «God chose the wise and noble Queen Esther to rescue his people from the king, Ahasuerus» and further describes her as «God’s beloved» and as «a wise and noble Hebrew Maiden who was as lovely as she was virtuous».<sup>67</sup>

Christine retells Esther’s manner of bringing Haman into disfavour with Ahasuerus but edits out the part where Esther makes it seem that Haman was sexually assaulting her – a ruse to enrage the king even more against his chief

63 For examples of recent authors who highlight Naomi’s agency in orchestrating the outcome, see M. Jackson: *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*, Oxford 2012, 180-197; A. Laffey and M. Leonard-Fleckman: *Ruth*, *Wisdom Commentary* 8, Collegeville, MN, 101-108.

64 Leonard-Fleckman: *Ruth* (n. 63), 121-22.

65 J.A. Wisman: *Christine de Pizan*, in: M.A. Taylor and A. Choi (eds.): *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, Grand Rapids 2012, 129.

66 de Pizan: *City* (n. 1), II.40

67 *Ibid.*, II.32.

and minister, the perfect creation of a devastatingly powerful false scenario in Ahasuerus's mind. Christine's innocent version reads as follows:

Some time later, one of his treacherous courtiers, a flatterer named Haman, roused the king's anger against the Jews to the point where the king gave an order they should be arrested and killed wherever they were to be found. Queen Esther was totally unaware of this ... However, Mordecai, the leader of the Jews who was one of her uncles, told her what was happening and begged her to do something immediately because the king's order would very soon be executed. The queen was deeply disturbed ... She therefore dressed herself up in her finest clothes ... choosing a garden which she knew the king would see from his windows ... on her return, she saw the king at his window and ... sank down to her knees and greeted him by prostrating herself before him. The king was so struck by this display of humility and so delighted by her dazzling beauty that he called out to her, saying that whatever she asked him for, he would not refuse her.<sup>68</sup>

So far, Christine has been relatively faithful to the biblical account,<sup>69</sup> more or less, merely simplifying it – for it is a very complex tale. She continues:

The lady replied that she wanted nothing other than to invite him to dine with her in her rooms and asked that he bring Haman with him.... He dined with her three days in a row, and was so captivated by her elegance and dignity, her charm and beauty, that he urged her once again to ask him any favour she wished. She threw himself at his feet and burst into tears, begging him to take pity on her people and not to dishonour her, after having shown her such distinction by putting all her kin and countrymen to death. Full of rage, the king replied, «But my lady, who has dared to do such a thing?» to which she answered, «My lord, it is none other than your chief minister, Haman, who is sitting right here.»<sup>70</sup>

Christine has definitely whitewashed Esther's intentions and actions. Admittedly to be successful against a clever opponent like Haman Esther would have had to work fairly deceptively herself. In the biblical account, immediately after Esther identifies Haman as the would-be eliminator of the Jews, the king storms out of the banquet in his fury to walk in his garden. While he is out there, Haman throws himself on the couch where Esther was reclining – to beg for his life – and when the returning king sees him there he is enraged that Haman should physically assault Esther in his house and in his presence.

68 Ibid., II.32.

69 Esther 7:3–5.

70 Esther 7:6–7.

Esther effectively created a thoroughly misleading false scenario to gain her ends and it is distinctly difficult to believe that Christine did not realise that this was the case. Her own skills at leading readers to her point of view must have allowed her to recognise Esther's skilful manipulation of Ahasuerus. So, Christine's Esther has been thoroughly «bowdlerised» to make her conform more exactly to Christine's view of how a great lady should act, being extremely *successful* and, in Christine's somewhat edited retelling, pretty well *blameless*. But that picture does not truly represent the biblical Esther.

The outcomes of the Esther story are the execution of Haman and his sons and the authorisation of a pre-emptive bout of killing and plunder by the Jews, before they might be attacked, in any of great lands under the king's control. This amazing and extreme response to the request to repeal the edict of slaughter against the Jews was allegedly necessitated by the fact that any law of the king could not be countermanded and so another law had to be written to supervene. Modern readers can well sympathise with Christine's desire to eliminate this section of the story from her writing to continue to demonstrate the blamelessness and blamefreeness of biblical women.<sup>71</sup>

#### *Women in the Apocrypha*

Judith, characterised by Christine as «the noble widow» and as «a noble and valiant lady,» and as a woman who was also «young and lovely,» is depicted by Christine as having «prayed to God day and night» but also as having «hatched a daring plan».<sup>72</sup>

71 Christine is appreciated by numerous modern interpreters. In her own day, her patrons and readers included Isabeau of Bavaria (mentioned above), Valentina Visconti (duchess of Orléan), and Margaret of Burgundy (spouse of the dauphin of France). In subsequent generations Anne of France, Anne of Brittany, Louise of Savoy, Margaret of Austria, and Marguerite of Navarre owned copies of *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. See J. Jansen: *Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing: A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Imagining Rooms of their Own*, New York 2011.

72 de Pizan: *City* (n. 1), II.31. This section on Judith and Susannah deals with stories found in the Greek texts and not the Hebrew, material often called «apocrypha» by Protestants. The reader should be aware that these stories were included in the Latin text that Christine would have used; however, even as early as the time of Jerome, Christians sometimes distinguished between the Old Testament texts found in the Hebrew (*canonici* or «canonical») and those found only in the Greek (*ecclesiastici* or «ecclesiastical,» that is, belonging to the church).

When Judith arrived at the camp of Holofernes, her great beauty, Christine claims, led to her being taken directly to the commander's tent. This could well be faithful to the biblical account but that account includes the detail that Judith offered to tell the commander a means by which he might overcome the Israelites with few casualties among his own troops. The way Christine tells the story, however, Judith does not say a word about thus betraying her people and merely «managed to string Holofernes along with little promises» until the night of the banquet, three nights later. What these little promises were is not specified and one can only wonder – but not for very long – what would completely capture the attention of a victorious battle commander.

At the banquet, Holofernes drinks himself into a stupor and passes out. Then Judith takes hold of his sword and cuts off his head, taking it back to the Israelite camp in a food bag. The head is later publicly displayed and a great massacre by the Israelites follows.<sup>73</sup> Anything deceitful in Judith's actions is glossed over – beyond the mention of the «daring plan» and Christine concludes as follows: «Thus the people of Israel were delivered out of the hands of Holofernes by Judith, that valiant woman whose praises shall be sung forever in Holy Scripture».<sup>74</sup> Christine's Judith follows Christine's pattern, *clever*, *successful* but *blamefree* rather than *blameless*. For, anyone with a copy of the Bible could read the story and see where Judith acted deceitfully and perhaps also notice that the biblical writers too depicted her as *blamefree*, which designation would serve their purposes very well also.

Christine, as already discussed above, depicts Susanna as an «honest woman, virtuous and lovely».<sup>75</sup> She was, as Christine puts it, «walking in her garden» when she was approached with adulterous suggestions by «two old men, corrupt priests», who, on disliking her refusal to cooperate, «threatened to denounce her in court for having been found with a young man».<sup>76</sup> Now, according to the biblical text, these men were «elders» – rather than priests – and often visited Joachim to discuss relevant matters with him, hence their power of access to the garden. The question presents itself whether Christine called them «corrupt priests» to make their crime either more intelligible – or more heinous – to her readership.

73 Judith 9–15.

74 de Pizan: City (n. 1), II.31.

75 Ibid., II.37.

76 Ibid., II.37.

Moreover, the text tells that Susanna had set up all the paraphernalia for a sumptuous pampering bath in her garden – a detail that Christine omitted – so the character Susanna, in the story, knew very well that if she screamed for help she would be well and truly compromised and then put to death for adultery. Events turned out as Susanna feared and she was condemned to death. Of course, Susanna had refused to give the name of the «young man» she was supposedly meeting in the garden for he did not exist! The text goes on to tell how a very young Daniel stopped the execution and by separating the two evil-doers, showed them up to be – somewhat ill-prepared – liars and Susanna was therefore exonerated. Christine ends by repeating that Susanna was «blameless» and that the truly guilty people were punished. She reiterates that women’s sole protection in a man’s world is to be perpetually, good, pure, and chaste, hence, *blameless*. As noted above, Susanna also achieved the other accolade, from the declaration of her innocence in court, that of being also blamefree.

#### *Women in the New Testament*

Christine refers to Our Lady’s sisters and Mary Magdalene and extols them for their «great devotion and unflinching love» in that they waited at the cross while Jesus was dying.<sup>77</sup> She does this immediately after referring to one of her noble patronesses in the most glowing of terms and, it seems to me, that she does this to support her friend and likely patroness, Queen Isabeau, characterising her as the «Empress who is unparalleled in splendour» and «is now living amongst us, despite all the slanders that prattling men have come out with».<sup>78</sup> Whether self-interest may be observed in the purveying of these particular fine sentiments readers may decide for themselves.<sup>79</sup> It must be remembered, however, that Christine had to earn her living by her writing so being connected to famous and important people along with keeping her name before the consciousness of the book-buying public were essential requirements.

From what has been noted earlier about how Queen Isabeau was referred to by her male contemporaries, it is not surprising that Christine offered her the praise seen here and, perhaps also, by writing *The Book of the City of Ladies*

77 Ibid., III.2.

78 Ibid., III.2.

79 For a discussion of this topic, see T. Adams: Christine de Pizan, Isabeau of Bavaria, and Female Regency, *French Historical Studies* 32 (2009) 1-32.

and presenting it to her, also some support in the face of her various ordeals in the political life of the fifteenth century.

### *Conclusions*

Christine had formed her views on the roles her society awarded to women during her early life. She had had unrivalled access to the higher realms of society and to the resources of education. From these she worked out what she disagreed with in the ways in which women were educated, regarded and treated and set out to use the Bible to support and enhance her arguments on these matters, most dear to her.

Christine had come to the conclusion that women who held any roles of power in the mediaeval world would be subjected to the most severe, and often unfair, criticism. Her response to that situation was to work out the ways in which women could operate in a *blameless* and *blamefree* way, successful but fending off any possibility of criticism even before it was levelled at them. She had learned the need for subtlety and for thinking ahead in a discussion, rather like plotting moves ahead in a chess game, and she sought to give women guidance on how to steer their way safely through arguments and discussions showing them how to manipulate the occasion, atmosphere, topics and style of language so that they had at least an even chance of prevailing.

*Abstract*

Christine de Pizan was familiar with 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> century French court circles through her father's position there. Her education, begun by her father, was further supported by her husband – a notary and royal secretary – but she was forced by his death to become the breadwinner for her family. She used what she had learned of life to equip women in her social milieu for life. Her advice – some of it actually rather sly – was down-to-earth and useful although cast in different language and genres for the different societal levels in which her work would sell and be of use. She showed women how to become successful, effective, socially acceptable and respected. And to give more familiarity and credibility to her suggestions she used, among others, the stories of biblical women as exemplars. She did, however, apply some manipulative manoeuvres in how she presented the biblical material in order to make it convey the understandings she desired.

Christine de Pizan war mit den französischen Hofkreisen des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts durch die dortige Stellung ihres Vaters vertraut. Ihre von ihrem Vater begonnene Ausbildung führte später ihr Ehemann – ein Notar und königlicher Sekretär – weiter. Durch den Tod des Gatten wurde Christine de Pizan gezwungen, ihre Familie selber zu ernähren. Sie gab das, was sie aus dem Leben gelernt hatte, den Frauen in ihrem sozialen Umfeld weiter. Ihre Ratschläge waren bodenständig und nützlich, obwohl sie in verschiedenen Sprachen und Genres für die verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Schichten, in denen sich ihre Arbeiten verkaufen und nützlich sein würden, verfasst wurden. Sie zeigte Frauen, wie sie erfolgreich, effektiv, sozial akzeptiert und respektiert werden können. Und um ihren Vorschlägen mehr Vertrautheit und Glaubwürdigkeit zu verleihen, nutzte sie unter anderem Geschichten von biblischen Frauen als Vorlagen. Sie wandte jedoch einige manipulative Manöver an, um das biblische Material so zu präsentieren, dass es das gewünschte Verständnis vermittelte.

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