Redressing the Virago in Christine de Pizan’s Livre de la cité des dames

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Abstract: Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris (c. 1362) maintains the classical view that viragos achieve greatness because they possess a man-like spirit, despite having a woman’s body. This essay examines how Christine de Pizan reclaims the female identity of the virago in Le Livre de la cité des dames (c. 1405). Critics have noted her position that all humans share the same essence, and that women are not inferior to men, but she also identifies certain attributes as being natural to women. Contrary to Boccaccio’s opinion that the best women are essentially men, Christine shows how female strengths enable women of all kinds to succeed, especially when the odds are against them. Stories involving concealment provide a means of revealing that women can best men, when necessary, and do so on their own terms.

Résumé: Dans son De mulieribus claris (c. 1362), Boccace exprime le point de vue classique que les viragos peuvent atteindre la grandeur parce qu'elles ont un esprit masculin en dépit de leurs corps féminins. Cet article examine la façon dont Christine de Pizan traite de l'identité de la virago dans Le Livre de la Cité des dames (c. 1405). Les critiques ont déjà souligné l'idée de Christine selon laquelle tous les êtres humains partagent la même essence, et les femmes ne sont pas inférieures aux hommes ; cependant, Christine identifie aussi certains attributs comme étant naturels aux femmes. Contrairement à Boccace, qui croit que les meilleures femmes sont essentiellement les hommes, Christine montre comment les qualités féminines permettent aux femmes de toutes sortes de réussir, surtout lorsque la chance ne tourne pas en leur faveur. Dans les histoires ou la dissimulation joue un rôle, les femmes démontrent qu'elles peuvent au besoin vaincre les hommes, et qu'elles peuvent le faire selon les moyens qui leur sont propres.

At the heart of the woman debate is the question of what qualities are inherent to female nature, and whether these attributes are negative or positive. The prevalent view from classical antiquity through the Renaissance was that women 1

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were weaker than men not only physically but mentally and morally, too. The exception: a group of women known as viragos who could achieve feats worthy of men because they possessed a man-like spirit, despite being born as women. Giovanni Boccaccio praises viragos in *De mulieribus claris* (c. 1362) for overcoming not only their enemies but the flaws of female nature, and he initiates a pattern of measuring women against the standard set by men even before the catalogue begins when he compliments Andrea Acciaiuoli, Countess of Altavilla, in his dedication by observing that the root of “Andrea” *andræ* is the Greek word for “men”. The learned Cornificia, he writes, exceeded the rest of her sex through uncommon talent and hard work [*ingenio et vigiliis femineum superasse sexum*] (*Famous Women*, LXXVI, p. 352-5), and Dido earned a name meaning “man-like” through the bravery and cunning she demonstrated in founding Carthage, leaving behind her identity as Elissa much as she left her homeland of Tyre (*FW*, XLII, p. 168-9).² Penalties (FW, XXXII, p. 128-31) and Zenobia (*FW*, C, p. 426-37) overcame the natural weakness of their female bodies to achieve greatness on the battlefield, and as for Artemisia, he reflects:

_Sed quid, Arthemisie acta spectantes, arbitrari possimum, nisi nature laborantis errore factum ut corpori, cui Deus virilem et magnificam infuderat animam, sexus femineus dat ex?_

_As we admire the deeds of Artemisia, what can we think except that the workings of nature erred in bestowing female sex on a body which God had endowed with a virile and lofty spirit?* (*FW*, LVII, p. 240-3)

In other words, the best kind of woman is essentially a man. The double standard creates an exasperating challenge if one seeks to prove female worth as Christine de Pizan does in *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (c. 1405) through the witness of examples. How can one earn respect for the sex if an accomplished woman can be redefined as unwomanly by token of her success? The mismatch of surface and substance provides a rhetorical strategy as well as an ideological dodge. As critics have noted, Boccaccio’s choice of Latin meant that his audience would primarily be composed of men despite ostensibly addressing his remarks to a female readership, and words of praise for an exceptional few women imply a less than flattering image of female nature generally speaking.³

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² All quotations from this text, hereafter abbreviated *FW*, are taken from the following parallel edition: Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. V. Brown, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2001. References indicate the chapter number with a roman numeral, followed by the relevant page number(s).

Critics have examined from a number of different angles the ways in which Christine refashions material from Boccaccio’s collection.¹ She does so with tactics reminiscent of his own, citing his authority openly while silently rewriting aspects of his stories that can change the meaning of the narratives profoundly. She does more than catalogue superlative heroines, aiming instead to secure from their examples a strong defence of all women. How she redresses the notion of the man-like woman is important because their stories serve as material for the foundation upon which she builds the City of Ladies. Their stories invite the reader to look more closely at the role of women as partners in the charting of civilization, to the benefit of both sexes. Christine reclaims the Amazons in particular as feminine characters, and she shows throughout the book how women overcome disparate circumstances by using traits that she maintains are natural among women. They achieve feats that would be admirable among men, but they do so with their own strengths: ingenuity, adaptability and a capacity for patience.

Quid est mulier?

The debate about female nature is part of a larger branch of philosophical enquiry concerned with defining what makes something uniquely itself, and not

something else, whether it happens to be an animal (e.g. horse), plant (e.g. tomato) or non-living material (e.g. iron). Qualities only possessed by tomatoes, for example, that all tomatoes share, constitute their essence; secondary attributes that distinguish different types of tomatoes from each other are called accidentals. As one might expect, the question of human nature was considerably more complex than an analysis of tomato varietals. The Aristotelian foundation for medieval metaphysics generated considerable interest during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as universities evolved into important intellectual centres and scholars gained access to new translations of Greek and Arabic texts. By the fifteenth century, the field had evolved into three main schools of thought under the intellectual leadership of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1224–1274), John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347), whose philosophies variously emphasize or de-emphasize the notion of essential qualities depending upon the philosopher’s stance on ideal models and their practical expression. “Essentialism” is a model for defining being that should theoretically be neutral toward the objects of study, without value judgments, but its application to men and women led to conclusions that women constituted a lower order of being. Even those who accepted that men and women are essentially the same interpreted the discrepancy arising from accidentals to be detrimental in the case of women. At its most extreme, misogynists described the female as being misshapen in the womb, fundamentally different from men created in God’s image, and closer in kind to beasts.

One aspect of Christine’s response, according to Benjamin Semple, is to note the limits of philosophy as a discipline of human thought that is constantly tested and subject to revision. To join this debate, she rejects the essentialist position that “men were essentially created to understand whereas women were essentially created to procreate”, as Earl Jeffrey Richards notes, claiming a place for women alongside men in the Field of Letters. Rosalind Brown-Grant shows how Christine

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disputes false dichotomies through demonstrations of logic, rhetoric and grammar, augmenting her arguments in the very way that she presents her case.\textsuperscript{11} It was not an idle exercise in argumentation for its own sake, however, and her goal is to move beyond an antagonistic stalemate. Margaret Brabant and Michael Brint see in Christine’s writing a desire “to sublate the dialectical oppositions of male and female by promoting a universalist ideal”, and suggest that \textit{La Cité des dames} “offers a rich mosaic of power relations – relations that are based on inclusion rather than exclusion and on equality rather than privilege or violence”.\textsuperscript{12} Thelma Fenster considers how Christine leverages the “strength in weakness” convention, suggesting that ultimately “in its greater weakness, \textit{femina} is better suited to represent the evanescence of human existence, the ready mortality of both female and male”.\textsuperscript{13} Reason identifies the soul as the true essence of all human beings, “laquelle ame Dieu crea et mist aussi bonne, aussi noble en toute pareille en corps femenin comme ou masculin | the whiche soule God made and put as good and as worthy and all even to the body of woman as of man” (I.9, Richards p. 78, cf. Curnow p. 652; Anslay sig. Dd6).\textsuperscript{14} This emphasis upon equality, scholars agree, stands at the heart of Christine’s reply to those who see women as essentially lesser beings.

After establishing that the soul is in all points equal, Reason turns to the profeminine argument that Eve was God’s last and best creation. Adam was formed from mud outside paradise, brought there after the fact, while women claim a finer origin:

\begin{quote}
Mais a ancore parler de la creation du corps, la femme fu doncques faite du souverain ouvrier. Et en quel place fu elle faicté ? En paradis terrestre. De quel chose fut ce ? De vil matiere ? Non, mais de la tres plus noble creature qui onques
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item All Middle French quotations come from the following edition of \textit{Le Livre de la cite des dames}, hereafter abbreviated “Richards”: Christine de Pizan, \textit{La Città delle dame}, trans. P. Caraffi, ed. E. J. Richards, 2nd ed., Milan, Luni, 1998. Cross-references are provided for another widely used Middle French edition, hereafter abbreviated “Curnow”: “The \textit{Livre de la Cite des Dames} of Christine de Pisan”, ed. M. C. Curnow, unpublished PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1975. Middle English quotations come from the following early printed book, hereafter abbreviated “Anslay”: \textit{The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes}, trans. B. Anslay, London, Pepwell, 1521; because the pages are unnumbered, the references are to quire signatures instead. This translation provides an opportunity to see how early readers experienced the text in Middle English and to note how it departs from the original at times in unique ways.
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eust esté créé : c’estoit le corps de l’omme de quoy Dieu la fist. (I.9, Richards p. 78; cf. Curnow p. 652)

But yet as to the makynge of the body, the woman was made of the moost Soverayne Werkeman. And in what place was she made? In paradyse terrestre. Wherof came the “foule matere” that she was made of? Nay, it was of the moost noble matere that ever was made, that was of the body that God made. (Anslay sig. Dd6’)

Anslay’s translation could be read as meaning that Adam’s body remained the most noble ever made, versus the most noble that had been made before Eve. The last phrase in the English version does not explicitly reference gender, consistent with the omission of “de l’omme” in London, British Library Royal MS 19.A.xix. Here, the two become one: God made her body from the body that God made, and the equal dignity of their souls is matched by the worthiness of bodies designed to match each other. Woman was not an afterthought, according to Reason: both sexes proceed from the same intention, at the same time, existing together in God’s mind even before He shaped Adam.

It would be premature to rally the citizens of La Cité des dames with a cry of liberté, égalité et fraternité, however. Sameness is not entirely desirable when applied to the model of the body politic, or the church as body of Christ, where the success of the whole requires contributions from different parts with diverse gifts. Christine maintains that while men and women share the same essence, each sex exhibits certain tendencies given to them by Nature, a categorical manner of difference intended to ensure the greater good when they work together. Part of the problem lies in perception of difference, rather than the rejection of it. Reason in I.10 goes through a list of behavioural patterns that misogynists identify as weaknesses, which she redefines in positive terms. If men claim that a woman is similar to a pretty rose with thorns underneath, that is exactly as it should be since the thorns maintain her virtue by pricking her conscience and ensuring she behaves in an honourable manner. If women are prone to weeping, surely this is no fault if their tears move others to compassion: Christ Himself was not ashamed to cry. If women are good company for children, it is because their gentle disposition is well suited to child minding, not because they are simimpleminded. The qualities associated

15 J. Summit pursues the line of reasoning that the men involved in the publication of the Cyte of Ladyes changed its focus to suit the concerns of a predominantly male audience; see Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 93-107.
16 While the body of Adam has become the “moost noble matere that ever was made” (sig. Dd6’), its source remains as humble in Anslay’s version, or perhaps even more lowly when he translates “limon de la terre” vividly as “slyme of the erthe” (sig. Dd6’).
with women in *La Cité des dames* are consistent with a passage in *L’Epistre au dieu d’Amours* (1399), incorporated by Thomas Hoccleve in *L’Epistre de Cupide* (1402):

Car nature de femme est debonnaire,
Mout piteuse, paoureuse et doubtable,
Humble, doulce, coye, et mout charitable,
Amiable, devote, en paix honteuse,
Et guerre craint, simple et religiouse. [...] 
Et celle qui ne les a d’aventure,
Contre le droit toute se desnature. 
(l. 668-72, 677-8)

Wommanes herte to no creweltee
Enclyned is, but they been charitable,
Pitous, deuout, full of humilitee,
Shamefast, debonair and amiable,
Dreedful and of hir wordes mesurable.
What womman this hath nat, per auenture,
Folwyth nothyng the way of hir nature. 
(l. 344-50)

As Fenster remarks, not all of the attributes sit easily with modern sensibilities, but they are held in high regard by Christine. The relative softness of the female body corresponds with an inner gentleness that is not man-like, but Christ-like, showing that women bear the image of God before and after His incarnation.

Notable among these attributes is the quality of “simplece” discussed by both Fenster and Semple as a term recovered from the Field of Letters with a positive rather than a negative meaning; it does not imply limited intellectual ability in her writing but purity of intention. It could be the remedial virtue for sophistry when it sins by twisting something good into a conduit for causing harm. Writings meant to affirm a commitment to clerical celibacy evolved into a body of misogynous writing that maligned the wives with sharp misogyny, including Matheolus’s *Liber Lamentationum*, the late thirteenth century treatise that begins the narrator’s dark contemplation. Despite her extensive studies, she cannot fathom why so many

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19 Thomas Hoccleve, “My Complente” and Other Poems, ed. R. Ellis, Exeter, Exeter University Press, 2001, p. 103. Hoccleve presents a reworked version of the lines quoted from Christine’s poem in this and the preceding stanza of his poem.
20 Fenster, art. cit., p. 363. See also Richards, art. cit, p. 107-8.
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authors disdain women and concludes that her own “simplee” must be the reason (I.1, Richards p. 44, cf. Curnow p. 619). Her virtuous intention as one with moral authority enhances, not weakens, the respectability of her intellectual credentials, as does her personal experience as one born in a female body. All three aspects of her being – intellectual, moral and physical – are aligned to reveal truth that readers have every reason to believe.

She commends virginity without denigrating men in her portraits of pre-Christian visionaries such as the sibyls and Cassandra, whose access to divine inspiration proceeds from purity of body and soul. Their willingness to share knowledge, for the benefit of others, contrasts with a silencing effect that Reason identifies with men who would curtail women’s participation in the search for truth. She does not turn a blind eye to an attempt to conceal from women misinformation about the female body in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta mulierum*, noting “il dit a son commencement que ne scay quel pape escommenia tout homme qui le lioit a femme ou a lire lui bailleroit | he saythe at his begynnynge that I wote not what pope cursed every man that sholde rede it to ony woman, or take it them to rede” (I.9, Richards p. 76, cf. Curnow p. 650; Anslay, sig. Dd5°). If women could see the book, and be heard in reply, the truth would be known by all. Similarly, she asks, after recounting the parable of the Canaanite woman, “Dieux, a quans coups noz pontificaux d’aujourd’hui daigneroient tenir parolles, mesmes de son sauvement, a une petite femmellette?” (I.10, Richards p. 90, cf. Curnow p. 662). Anslay’s early English translation omits this observation, ironcally silencing an observation about the silencing of women, though the suppression might have been motivated at least in part by an instinct for self-preservation: it would have been safer to leave it out than to repeat her outspoken criticism of contemporary church authorities. The problem she identifies is not just the human limitations of philosophical inquiry, but the limitations placed upon women’s participation in the exchange of knowledge. The charge weighs heavily upon the shoulders of men who should be most attentive to inclusivity, following Christ’s example, and are ultimately responsible to a higher authority than worldly opinion.

From this perspective, physical limitations matter less than the cultivation of moral virtue with a view to the world to come, and the “science” that a scholar leaves as a legacy to future generations beyond the term of his or her mortal life. Yet Christine associates both capacities with the body to a greater extent than one is accustomed to thinking today. Reason tells Christine, “se Nature n’a donné grant force de membres a corps de femme, que elle l’a bien recompensé en ce que inclination y a mise tres vertueuse” (I.14, Richards p. 104, cf. Curnow p. 675). Anslay departs from the original text to make the statement even stronger: “yf Nature had not gyven grete strengthe of membres to a woman’s body, that she recompenseth her ryght well in that that there is gyven to her a more vertuous inclynacyon” (Anslay sig. Ff5°). Reason makes a parallel statement with regard to


the female intellect, remarking upon the role of social institutions in cultivating natural talent, the inability to witness female aptitude for scholarship because girls are hidden away at home. She argues that if girls went to school, as boys do:

qu’elles apprendroient aussi parfaictement et entendoient les soubtilletez de toutes les ars et sciences, comme ilz font. Et par aventure plus de teles y a, car si que j’ay touchié cy devant, de tant comme femmes ont le corps plus delié que les hommes, plus faible et moins abile a plusieurs choses faire, de tant ont elles l’entendement plus a delivre et plus agu ou elles s’appliquent. (I.27, Richards p. 151-2, cf. Curnow p. 721)

that they sholde lerne as parfytely and they sholde be as wel entred into the subtyltes of al the artes and scyences as they be. And peradventure there sholde be mo of them, for I have touched heretofore by howe moche that women have the body more softe than the men have and lesse habyle to do dyvers thynges, by so moche they have the understandyne more sharpe there as they apply it. (Anslay sig. Kk5r)

She supports this assertion with her first example of a woman accomplished in letters: Cornifica “fu de ses parens envoyee a l’escole par maniere de trufferie et de ruse avec Cornifficien son frere | was sent to the scole by her fader in maner of scorne or of jape with her brother Cornyfycyen” (I.28, Richards p. 154, cf. Curnow p. 723; Anslay sig. Kk6r). Anslay, interestingly enough, attributes the scheme to her father alone; perhaps this signals the dominance of patrilineal authority, or perhaps her aptitude for study would not be such a joke to her mother. Cornifica surpasses both his expectations and the accomplishments of her brother, even if a ruse was required to prove this truth. Much as “simplece” becomes a positive attribute in a soul that harbours no malice, resorting to “cautelles” can be praiseworthy if the cause is just.

Christine recounts multiple narratives in La Cité des dames involving concealment that reveal the essential nature of women in a positive light. More than petty trickery is at stake when her characters mask themselves, choosing indirectness of necessity, but in story after story they go on to do more than escape imminent peril: they reverse the power dynamic to the point where the aggressors find themselves on the defence instead. The adaptability of women proves to be one of their greatest assets. The characters regarded as viragos in Boccaccio’s collection succeed in pursuits typically associated with men using strengths in which women naturally exceed men, relying foremost on cleverness to counter threats against them. Christine does this, too, with more than a few tricks up her sleeve as she strategically deploys her defence of women. Boccaccio displays his aptitude for sleight of hand in the dedication to Andrea Acciaiuoli, before the first story is told in De mulieribus claris; Christine likewise opens La Cité des dames with a not-so-straightforward beginning.

Rethinking first impressions

Identity is something to be discovered rather than assumed based on the statements of others. The narrator makes this mistake when she begins Matheolus’s book “en soubz riant”, anticipating a pleasurable diversion from her serious work
because “maintes foys ouy dire avoye qu’entre les aultres livres cellui parloit bien à la reverence des femmes” (I.1, Richards p. 40, cf. Curnow p. 616-7). Fenster catches the author’s wink to the audience, who would know the true nature of the treatise, agreeing with Christine Reno that the initial scenes of La Cité des dames are full of wry humour.28 Anslay attaches a different mood to the moment when she picks up the book, conveying self-confidence instead of misunderstanding on the part of an author; in his version, she is “laughynge” at the foolishness of Matheolus and looking forward to contesting the work of a clerk who does “not speke well of the reverence of women” (Anslay sig. Bb1r). What ensues is a case of mistaken identity when the fictional Christine fails to recognize Reason, Rectitude and Justice, crossing herself hastily in fear that they might intend to lead her astray, a misunderstanding that leads to more laughter: “Adonc celle, qui premiere des trois estoit, en sousriant, me prist ainsi a arraisonner | And then she whiche was the fyrst of the thre, in laughynge, began thus to reason with me” (I.2, Richards p. 46, cf. Curnow p. 622). Reason seeks to dispel the narrator’s lamentation with a humorous anecdote, which she offers with little preamble. Instead of telling Christine what to think, Reason prods her into figuring it out from the example put before her, just as the reader should make up his or her own mind based on the merits of the arguments that follow.

Subversively enough, the first story in La Cité des dames is not about a woman but about a group of men instead:

Tu ressembles le fol, dont la truffe parle, qui en dormant au molin fu revestu de la robe d’une femme, et au resveiller, pour ce que ceux qui le moquoyent lui tesmoignoient que femme estoit, crut mieulx leur faulx dis que la certaineté de son estre. (I.2, Richards p. 46-8, cf. Curnow p. 622-3)

Thou resemblest the fole of the whiche was made a jape, whiche was slepyng in the mylle and [was] clothed in the clothynge of a woman. And to make resemblaunce those that mocked hym wytнесsed that he was a woman, and so he byleved more theyr false saynges than the certaynte of his beynge. (Anslay sig. Bb3r)

Anslay’s English translation closely follows the version in BL Royal MS 19.A.xix where the scribe has written “au ressembler” instead of “au resveiller”, an error that brings the disguise forefront of the episode, but the timing is important, too. The fool should come to his senses when he wakes up, just as the fictional Christine should cast off the melancholy that tangled up her thinking in the first chapter. Laughter is the natural antidote for the narrator’s gloom. However, the underlying point is meant in earnest: why would she believe what misogynists say about women, when as a woman she knows the truth? Maureen Quilligan sees the fable as turning the tables on male writers who lack Christine’s authority on gender issues as

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a woman herself. In Kevin Brownlee’s reading, the mini-fabliau undercuts the premise that men are of a higher order than women. The companions, and by extension the misogynists they represent, are the ones who look foolish when we see through the ruse. Unlike the companions who sabotage the fool, the Virtues reassure Christine that they have come to help, and that together they have serious work to do.

Reason follows the anecdote with a contrasting image of female nature being similar to gold, ever improved with testing, and when placed in extreme heat, is capable of taking different forms without changing its essence. This point is sufficiently important that Christine repeats it when she and Reason break ground to begin the City of Ladies: “que l’or plus est en la fournaise, plus s’afine | that the gold the more it is in the fornayce, the more it fyneth hym” (I.8, Richards p. 66, cf. Curnow p. 640; Anslay sig. Dd1). By contrast, the men in the anecdote cannot alter their friend’s identity any more than an alchemist could transmute lead into gold. This truth is also repeated twice: “ce que Nature donne, nul ne puet tollir | that that Nature gyveth may not be taken away” (I.10, II.36, Richards p. 82, 316, cf. Curnow p. 654, 875; Anslay sig. Ee1, H4). The first time that the maxim appears in the text, it serves as a prelude to the disputation between Reason and Christine concerning false generalizations about women. Rectitude repeats it a second time with respect to the author specifically, recalling how her father encouraged her natural aptitude for scholarship. It applies to the characteristics of female nature as a whole and to the natural talents gifted to specific individuals. Likewise, the principle of malleability seems to hold true both in terms of female nature, manifested in its diversity across many individuals, as well as the adaptability of individuals, depending upon the circumstances that test them. Queen Hypsicratea, for example, is no less noble when she leaves the luxury of court life behind to follow Mithridates on his military campaigns, disguising herself as a soldier but remaining an ever faithful wife (II.14). The metaphor of adversity as a forge indicates the formative role of experience, even when it is negative, as a means of bringing out the lustre of potentialities that existed all along. Circumstances might change quickly, for reasons beyond an individual’s control, but the innate adaptability women possess makes them more than equal to the challenge.

Military aggressors find themselves blindsided in several stories when they make the mistake of believing that superior force means assured victory. In I.17, Cyrus assembles his army with the intention of adding Scythia to his impressive empire, anticipating little challenge from the remote nation. Thamiris receives advance notice from her spies and makes the tactical decision to leave the border undefended, drawing the invaders into the country’s mountainous terrain before forcing the engagement on terms of her choosing. Cyrus’s army becomes trapped in ravines with no way to advance, and no way to retreat as her concealed forces spring

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the ambush from the advantage of higher ground. Thamiris uses the land to repel an overland invasion; Artemisia likewise turns back a naval invasion by using the two ports of Halicarnassus to trap the Rhodesian navy. Christine writes that officials, acting on her instructions, feign signs of welcome to draw the foreign ships into the main harbour while her own fleet launches unseen from another location, circling around to blockade the entrance of the main harbour, seizing the ships of their enemies who have no way out to open sea: the would-be conquerors are conquered instead. Artemisia goes further, putting her sailors aboard the seized ships and sailing them back to Rhodes, where the false welcome at Halicarnassus undergoes an ironic turn. This time, the Rhodesians extend a genuine welcome to what they recognize by sight as their own ships, discovering too late that Artemisia has fooled them. The cleverness of the ploy claims victory not once but twice, through unexpected means. Sheer bravery goes a long way, too. Rectitude tells Christine how Judith effected a stunning military reversal during a siege of her city even though she was not herself a military commander, and had only one female attendant as back up when she infiltrated the enemy camp (II.31). They see no threat in the women; their beauty disguises the strength of resolve motivating them. Judith patiently orchestrates events so that she has access to Holophernes when he is at his most vulnerable, without guards, asleep and alone in his own bed. Taking out the leader, with her tactical strike, sends the power of his army into disarray. In all three examples, the men gauge strength based on what they see, overlooking weaknesses of their own. The role reversal of powerless and empowered takes antifrasis to a degree that affects entire societies, not just a handful of men in a mill.

For women, rhetorical abuse by misogynists such as Matheolus is hard to laugh away when one looks more closely; out of sight in the home, she describes domestic abuse as real and difficult to escape: “Dieux ! quantes dures bateures, sans cause et sans raison, quantes layenges, quantes vilenies, injures, servitudes et outrages y sueffrent maintes bonnes preudefemmes [...]” (II.13, Richards p. 254, cf. Curnow p. 818; Anslay sig. C4v). The topic comes up again when she tells Rectitude how family members might try when they learn that a daughter is the victim of domestic abuse to extricate her from the situation, but historical records confirm that it would have been very difficult to dissolve a marriage during the Middle Ages. Christine writes, moreover, that women will many times choose to stay with abusive husbands, “et ce sont choses que on voit tous les jours, mais chacun ne considere pas | And these thynges be sene all daye, but all people consydereth it not” (II.23, BL Royal MS 19.A.xix, fol. 92r; Anslay sig. E4v), phrased rather awkwardly by the translator. Christine reworded the sentence slightly in later redactions: “et ce sont choses que chacun jour on voit, mais chacun n’y vise” (II.23, Richards p. 278, cf. Curnow p. 841). She does not spin a happy ending to these anecdotes. Reason belittles the misogynists with her story

27 Artemisia’s chapter is I.21 in late redactions of the City of Ladies; BL Royal MS 19.A.xix and the Cyte of Ladyes preserve an earlier redaction of the text, in which Artemisia’s chapter is I.25.

about the fool in the mill, but she is not dismissing the importance of redressing their wrongs. Christine gives considerable space to narratives in *La Cité des dames* extolling marriages where the women find a happy ending beside men who wronged them deeply. She affirms a conservative, pre-feminist view that wives should submit to their husbands’ authority. It is important to realize that the author is not, however, saying that one should just look the other way; she asks the reader to look more closely. The depiction of women in the *Roman de la Rose* is one part of a wider problem that she seeks to redress in *La Cité des dames* by re-envisioning a positive value for women, as women, in her reshaping of Western ideological tradition.

**Re-dressing the virago in La Cité des dames**

The Amazons are the quintessential viragos, able to fight hand to hand with their enemies and win. Christine does not diminish their physical strength, but she extrapolates it from the individual body to a community of women who remain collectively weaker as an army than the forces arrayed against them. They are a template for courtly honour in Christine’s retelling, maintaining an empire that pre-dates the fall of Troy, and remains standing more than four hundred years after Rome came into being (I.19). Camilla, who successfully avenges her father’s fall from power, sides against Aeneas when he arrives in Troy from Italy (I.24). Carthage, founded by Dido, would be the great rival to Rome at the height of its power; the fact that Aeneas wronged her in love adds to the subtext of challenge to the dominant historical narrative of Rome’s greatness (I.46, II.55). Dido’s cleverness in establishing Carthage, splitting an ox hide into the thinnest possible strips to enclose as much territory as possible, wins grudging respect from the neighbours who abide by the contract to sell the land to her; Romulus is viewed with much greater wariness by neighbouring peoples when he founds Rome, with good reason, since his trick relies on physical might to abduct unwilling women so that his soldiers might have wives and children to sustain the population of their new city. The female empire also had to search beyond its borders for a means of sustaining its populace, but in Christine’s retelling of the legend, they become intertwined with the founding myths of Western Europe in a manner that increases their honour as women.

In the oldest versions of the myth, the Amazons are not “man-like” women because they are not civilized enough to be part of mankind, lacking necessary characteristics that elevate people above amoral creatures. Justin (d. 165 AD) depicts them as aggressive warmongers who came to power after killing the men in their nation. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 AD) likens them to beasts with no regard for marriage, seeking out men for sex during a certain season of the year and killing any male offspring they might have. Orosius (fl. 414) repeats this unflattering portrait in historical writings that circulated among medieval readers and survive in more than 200 manuscripts. The strong women denature themselves physically to

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become more man-like in their devotion to warfare. Traditionally, they remove the left breast from noble girls to facilitate holding a shield, and the right in the case of commoners, to give them a clear draw of the bow. For those appalled by their barbarism, the Amazons were fortunately a distant threat in Scythia, far from the familiar world of medieval Europeans. Their land is included among the marvels seen in Mandeville’s Travels (c. 1357), attributed to a fictional English knignt; it first appeared in France but was translated into Latin and eight vernacular languages, including English four times over. As monstrous as they might seem to be, they stand as sentinels before Alexander’s Gate to keep it secure against the hordes of monsters, protecting all of Europe. They stay right at the outer edge of civilization but display few of the essential characteristics for the definition of a civilized man, who possesses a sense of natural order and moral virtue.

New additions to the legend over time took a new perspective as they incorporated the Amazons into accounts of the Trojan War. An alliance between the Amazons and the Trojans held tremendous imaginative potential, and it rehabilitated not only their character but also their cultural standing since Europeans traced their heritage to Troy in foundation myths as the origin of Western nobility. The focus in these episodes rests on the Amazons’ man-like aptitude for martial activities, and it is at this point that they become viragos. Dictys’ putative account of the Trojan War from the Greek point of view (fourth century AD) tells how Penthesilea fought on the Trojan side as a mercenary keen to fight; Dares, supposedly telling events from a Trojan perspective (sixth century AD), says instead that romantic feelings motivated her participation after Hector’s death and precipitated her combat with Pyrrhus, inspiring men on the battlefield with her man-like accomplishments. The Amazons’ stature rose in the twelfth century with Benoît’s courtly revision of the legend and Guido delle Colonne’s Historia destructionis Troiae (1287), making available a more genteel depiction of the female warriors. Penthesilea joins the Trojan War for the sake of honour and demonstrates feats of arms that would do credit to a knight. They can participate in chivalric society as admirable viragos, without shame, but they stand apart from the natural parameters of female behaviour. Addressing a delicate point, Benoît reports that Amazon women raise their male children for a year and then send them to their fathers for a suitable upbringing. The more barbarous account of infanticide continued circulating in other

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works. Boccaccio would have known both the classical and the courtly traditions, and he acknowledges differing opinions about Penthesilea’s involvement in the Trojan War, describing her motive as wishing to have a child by Hector (FW, XXXII, p. 128-31). He reports that Amazons killed their male offspring (FW, XI-XII, p. 52-3), following the classical tradition, as one would expect in the context of his Latin compendia of lives.

As part of Christine’s study of female nature, the traditional focus on the body shifts to highlight the Amazons’ adaptability and spirit of honour. The City of Ladies differs from the existing exemplars by imagining a scene of abandonment and vulnerability when the women of Scythia found themselves without protection in a time of war:

> Quant les femmes du lieu virent que tous avoyent per dus leur maris et freres et parens et ne leur estoit demourez que les viellars et les petis enfans, elles s’assemblerent par grant courage et prisdront conseil entre elles [...] (I.16, Richards p. 110, cf. Curnow p. 681)

> And when the women of that place sawe that they had lost theyr housbandes, theyr bretherne and theyr kynnesmen, and there was none lefte but olde men and chyldren, they assembled by grete courage and toke counsayle bytwene them [...] (Anslay sig. Gg2)

They consider a course of action advisedly in a parliament, much as the Sabine women do, but whereas the founding mothers of Rome intercede to ask for mercy from men who love them, the Amazons have too few rather than too many male relatives able to fight. They take up arms to defend their homeland against foreign aggressors, remembering those they had lost: “et a brief parler, moult bien vengirent la mort de leurs amis | to speke shortely, they avenged the dethe of theyr frendes full notably” (I.16, ibid.). Their foundation story in Christine’s version includes none of the civil warfare and murderousness in the histories of Justin and Orosius. She also changes Boccaccio’s account of how Thamiris defeated Cyrus to show that the mothers felt a natural love for their sons as well as their daughters, and did not forget them. The ambush in Boccaccio’s version occurs when men still lived in Scythia; relocating the story within Amazon history shows strength of maternal devotion to sons who live afar. Much as the first Amazons defended their territory and avenged the male relatives who could not protect them, Thamiris safeguards her country from potential subjugation, exacting revenge this time for a son she could not protect in person.

In the following chapters, Christine brings the outlying Amazon Empire into the history of Western civilization by connecting their deeds with those of the Greek and Trojan heroes. Unlike Ovid’s Heroides, in which the women write letters to the heroes from afar, the Amazons of the City of Ladies meet the Greeks and Trojans, face to face. Her account of their history differs significantly from the events reported in Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris, where Hercules and Theseus easily

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33 Christine embraces but does not invent this, as Quilligan implies in “Translating Dismemberment”, art. cit., p. 259.
put the Amazons into disarray; manly women are no match for heroic men. Christine, on the other hand, imagines Hercules as a young but prudent war advisor who counsels a pre-emptive attack against the Amazons before their empire stretches as far as Greece. The implied disparity of power favours the female nation; in her account, Hercules orders the Greeks to conceal themselves until nightfall, when their chances for ambush would be best, under the secrecy of night. Boccaccio describes the women scattering, willy-nilly, and launching a disastrous counterattack on Greece. Here, the women comport themselves to the highest standards of chivalry. Menalippe and Hippolyta run to arm themselves immediately, jousting against the key male heroes with such force that both they and their opponents – and their horses – end up in a heap on the ground. Reason agrees in an aside to the audience that this is astonishing, and we catch another wink from the author as she casts about for excuses to forgive their inability to perform as expected: the Greeks had just finished a tiring voyage, and the horse under Hercules must have tripped. Though the female knights are captured, the heroes show them great honour.

The text implies that Queen Orithya might have prevailed against the Greek army, but she decided to withhold her forces pending the release of the ransomed noblewomen. Hercules engages in a negotiation with her ambassadors, making requests respectfully rather than dictating terms. His request for a suit of Amazon armour is interesting for several reasons. Boccaccio relates how Hercules was tasked with retrieving a special belt from the Amazons as one of his labours, which the hero secures from Orithya in exchange for the release of Menalippe. Theseus carries off Hippolyta, and the Amazon queen can do nothing to avenge the loss. Christine alters the quest with a piece of clothing as its goal, into a quest for peace between two formidable empires. Hercules asks for the armour as a sign of respect for their military prowess, a token with added symbolism since the invention of armour is a female accomplishment credited to Minerva, a gift to all knights from a woman whose intellect made possible the protection of many men. It also puts a twist on the romance convention that a lady give a token to the champion who wins her favour. Theseus requests permission to marry Hippolyta from Orithya, via the intermediary of Hercules, and soon the peace between the two empires is sealed with wedding celebrations. The accord stands in marked contrast to the enmity triggered between Greece and Troy by a ruptured marriage: in the one case, hostilities continued for ten years; in the other, peace is ensured in a day. The two nations see eye-to-eye, and on a personal level Theseus sees Hippolyta as a desirable match, not just a war prize. Christine reinforces a positive relationship between heroic Amazons and men held in high esteem by the classical tradition, even as they submit to worthy men in a manner that conforms with medieval social conventions.

Penthesilea reverses the pattern of Theseus falling in love with Hippolyta when she falls in love with Hector of Troy, chastely, on account of his extraordinary reputation for chivalry; as Reason explains, like will naturally seek out like. The remote distance between Scythia and Western Europe becomes a measure for respect and devotion: the journey of the Amazon queen and her retinue is reminiscent of the journey to Solomon by Sheba. In this case, Penthesilea is too late:

her soliloquy upon seeing Hector’s embalmed corpse makes the Trojans weep, and her vow of vengeance is made before all, and carried out nobly. She fights against Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, who killed Hector and was himself slain; the Amazon steps into the role of vengeance, upon her honour, without a formal obligation to Hector or expectation of gain from him. She defeats Pyrrhus in single combat so resoundingly that it seems impossible that he would live. When he does, his vengeance is the inverse of her selfless motives. He instructs his men to cut her off from reinforcements and to wear her down so that Pyrrhus will be assured of victory when they meet a second time. Female warriors rely on ambush tactics in other stories, but always in the context of two armies meeting, usually when they are outnumbered and defending their own soil. Pyrrhus appears cowardly by contrast when he refuses to meet Penthesilea again, knight to knight, and when he finally strikes the killing blow, the honour belongs to the Amazon. Her noble but doomed ending befits the tragic fall of Troy, and Reason chooses this moment to speak of how the Amazon Empire eventually crumbled into ruin itself after a span of eight hundred years. The Roman Empire and Alexander the Great are mentioned in passing, almost as an afterthought; that two great empires could be reduced to footnotes in the history of the Amazons is a bold move by Christine. In her retelling, the Amazons fill a noble place within the foundation myth of Western Europe, motivated to join the epic Trojan War not out of blood lust but from a chaste admiration of the legendary forefather of France. The Amazons, as Christine depicts them, are grieving widows, devoted mothers, admirable virgins, and worthy to be the wives of great heroes. Far from being manly, they are admirable women.

She integrates them with narratives of other women whose strength of spirit manifests itself in societies where men ordinarily control political and military power. Christine’s Fredegunde inspires pity among the people of France for her infant son, their king, rallying them to uphold the integrity of their nation until he grows into strength; she rides amid the French troops to the edge of the enemy camp, concealed by branches and greenery, carrying off a surprise attack that eliminates the threat to their kingdom (I.13, I.23). Lilia earns praise when she halts the retreat of Theodoric by lifting her smock, declaring he has nowhere to flee except to the womb, which shames him so much that he re-engages in the fight and carries the day on the battlefield (I.22). Her gesture is the inverse of Griselda’s request for a simple smock to cover the womb that bore Walter’s children when all else is stripped away in compensation for the virginity she gave her husband, which she could never recover (II.50). Hypsicratea shows extreme devotion to her husband Mithridates by accompanying him on all of his expeditions, not as a fierce combatant, but disguised as a soldier so that she could serve and comfort him as she would at home (II.14). Berenice, as a mother in profound grief, exacts vengeance upon her brother-in-law for the death of her sons (I.25); Christine alters the story of Argia from Boccaccio’s account by adding an ending worthy of the Amazons, in which she leads a contingent of women to exact retribution for her husband’s death,

capturing and killing the inhabitants of a nearby city (II.17). Triaria fights viciously side by side with her husband through a bloody slaughter (II.15), and Antonia devises a strategy to help her husband Belisarius overcome the Vandals, then leads part of his force when they carry it out victoriously (II.29). The Amazons are integrated with women who share similar bravery in times of warfare because they are loyal to men who matter greatly to them.

Zenobia is a final example worth special note since her legend appears both in *De mulieribus claris* and *De casibus virorum illustrium*, a collection predominantly about the fall of famous men. Chaucer includes Zenobia in the Monk’s Tale alongside brief accounts of illustrious men, based on Boccaccio’s earlier writing, and John Lydgate would translate Boccaccio’s collection in full as the *Fall of Princes* (c. 1431-9). In Christine’s version, Zenobia surpassed “tous les chevaliers du monde en son temps | passed all other knyghtes of the worlde that tyme”, but she also exceeded “toutes autres dames en nobles et bonnes meurs et honnesté de vie | all other ladyes in noblesse and good condycyons of honest lyfe” (I.20, Richards p. 134, cf. Curnow p. 704; Anslay sig. II1v). Her defeat by the Roman Emperor Aurelianus is a reversal of Fortune on the battlefield omitted by Christine, who chooses instead to leave her story *in medias res*, showing the queen seeing to the education of her children, through whom her noble lineage would continue. She does not specify whether these are sons or daughters, as both would be worthy of a royal education in *La Cité des dames*, and both could achieve excellence by following their various strengths. Imperial might in Zenobia’s story is complemented by studious achievement in a manner befitting the classical idea of *translatio imperii et studii*, in which the flourishing of political might and cultural greatness went hand in hand. Her achievement in masculine pursuits is likewise complemented by a felicitous marriage and a dedication to her children. Others might recount her tragic ending, when victory went to another leader, but Reason leaves Zenobia in her study at home, writing all her own stories by her own hand. The author likewise rewrites history to accommodate heroic women, as women, in *La Cité des dames*.

**The new virago**

Patient Griselda, in her stoic deference to Walter, overshadows the heroines of the other narratives Christine chooses to retell from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Two of them serve as cautionary tales about women who loved too much as part of Rectitude’s response to the accusation that women are fickle in bestowing their attentions and only capable of shallow feelings. Ghismonda (II.59; *Decameron*, IV.1) and Lisabetta (II.60; *Decameron*, IV.5) pursue clandestine love affairs with men of lower social standing than they themselves hold, inverting how Walter is of much higher birth than Griselda. For Ghismonda’s father and Lisabetta’s brothers, the disparity in rank causes as much anger as the moral transgression; perhaps even more so. Walter leads his wife to believe that their children are unworthy to live, because of her, and though she has the unique ability as a woman to give life, he holds the social authority to command death at will. The ruse he orchestrates is horrifying because it is so credible. In the other Decameron narratives, Tancred orders the death of Ghismonda’s lover, Guiscardo, and the brothers of Lisabetta kill Lorenzo with their own hands. Their absolute power over others is unmatched by
women, who aspire at best to supreme self-possession. Yet Ghismonda and Lisabetta, in both literary versions, also assign blame to their male kin for negligence of their social responsibilities when Tancredi refuses to let Ghismonda remarry after her husband’s death, and Lisabetta remains unmarried because of the avarice of the brothers who are unwilling to pay her dowry. Their modest initial expectations stand in marked contrast to the sensational death scenes that bring each story to a tragic close. The romantic aspect of the love stories is relatively minor compared to the dynamic between the women and male relatives with tyrannical control over the members of their households. When Walter dismisses Griselda, stripped of all but a simple shift, her father Janicola gives her back a dress he kept for her at home, welcoming her without recrimination (II.50; Decameron X.10). Ghismonda and Lisabetta live in much more refined households than hers, in terms of material wealth, but they have no recourse when their relatives refuse to let them leave.

What if they did leave, on their own? Boccaccio sets this alternative scenario in motion with a new virago suited to adopting a male trade in the world of commerce, displaying a spirit of independence and intelligence necessary for any man who aspires to succeed as a merchant. The story of Bernabo’s wife (II.9) takes place in a contemporary late medieval setting where contests are won and lost among men in the field of finance. A group of merchants speculate that their wives are probably taking advantage of their absence by having affairs, except for Bernabo, who speaks high praise about his wife Zinerva’s virtue, telling them that she is not only skilled at embroidery but adept in manly pursuits:

> Oltre a questo, niumo scudiere, o famigliare che dir vogliamo, diceva trovarsi il quale meglio né piú accortamente servisse a una tavola d'un signore, che serviva ella, si come colei che era costumatissima, savia e discreta molto. Appresso questo la commendò meglio saper cavalcare un cavallo, tenere uno uccello, leggere e scrivere e fare una ragione che se un mercatante fosse [...]

Moreover so well-mannered, discreet and sensible was she that she was as fit to wait at a lord's table as any squire or manservant or such like, the best and most adroit that could be found. To which encomium he added that she knew how to manage a horse, fly a hawk, read, write and cast up accounts better than as if she were a merchant [...]

He wagers 5000 florins that Ambrogioiuolo, another man in the group, would not succeed in his boast that he could seduce Bernabo’s wife. This would have been an astonishing amount of money. A dowry among members of the ruling class in mid-fifteenth century Florence would typically have been about 1000 florins. Ambrogioiuolo quickly discovers from local reports that Zinerva is indeed beyond reproach, yet determined not to lose, he bribes an old woman into asking her to

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36 Quotations come from the Decameron Web project at Brown University, based upon the 1992 edition of V. Branca, and a 1903 translation by J. M. Rigg in the public domain, [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/).

safeguard several chests of valuables in her household for a few days. Zinerva does so without knowing that Ambrogiuolo has hidden himself inside, giving him the opportunity to steal into her bedchamber while she is sleeping, noting the furnishings of the room and the details of her body. He also steals an embroidered purse, and once the old woman reclaims the chests, Ambrogiuolo rides back to the group of merchants with a story of success. He claims that she gave him the purse as a love token, and he accurately describes details of her private chamber to Bernabo. When he mentions a small mole on her left breast, Bernabo believes that Ambrogiuolo did indeed sleep with his wife. He pays the wager and sends word for Zinerva to be put to death before he returns home. Yet she proves that she could indeed serve as well as a man: the merchant virago leaves in masculine clothes with a new identity, and as Sicurano she proves to be a shrewder businessman than her husband had been.

V. L. Bullough writes that attempts by women to disguise themselves in male clothing were “tolerated in the medieval period, even encouraged […] because it was assumed such women were striving to become more male-like and therefore better persons”. Historical studies show that women with few alternatives might try to pass for a boy as a means of attaining safer, better paying and more virtuous work opportunities than the alternative for women of prostitution. Clothing was not however a trivial matter since attire conveyed a great deal of information about status within a community, and sumptuary laws variously attempted to regulate economic consumption, hierarchical privilege and moral standards. Women’s predilection for frippery became a standard jibe in misogynist literature, but fashion was initially a male preoccupation, consistent with their greater access to income; production once carried out at home by women developed into a serious business enterprise among international merchants, with lucrative centres of textile production in Flanders, France and Italy. Sarah-Grace Heller argues that medieval regulations for clothing “reveal shifts in fabric prices, income thresholds, and consciousness of the complex social ladder”. Fashion was by definition always changing, and regulations against one type of ornament could be cleverly eluded by adopting a different ornament instead. Clothes were not lightly discarded, however. The fact that Griselda’s father kept her worn, old clothing is a sign of acceptance and change in life status, but it is also speaks of frugality among people who had few alternative clothes to wear. Whether Zinerva acquired the clothing by charity (in Boccaccio’s version) or as her first earned payment from another woman (in

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Christine’s version), the willingness of others to give her clothing represents for a reader familiar with the material culture her worthiness in the eyes of the people who help her.43

For Christine, masculine attire creates opportunities to explore female capabilities that are usually foreclosed to them because of social conventions, rather than the supposed natural limitations of the female sex. Her heroines are not aspiring to become man-like but worthy to be recognized for what they accomplish as women. Clothing allows Christine challenge perceptions of female abilities without overturning social order entirely: Sagurat, as she is called in Christine’s version, reassumes feminine clothing and her place as Bernabo’s wife at the conclusion of her tale, when they travel home. She does not begin the story with the derisive banter about the faithlessness expected in wives, as Boccaccio does in a story that turns on changeability as its key theme of a trickster who is himself tricked in the end. Christine’s story focuses on faithful service as a virtue correspondent with female nature. She goes unnamed in this version until she chooses the name Sagurat; her cleverness, patience and virtue come to the fore under duress, yet she remains Bernabo’s wife, the same gold crafted into another fashion. Her faithful service recalls Rectitude’s earlier point that a wife is more attentive than a servant could be, as Hypsicratea proved in an earlier story. Here, the same virtues that make her an excellent wife are highly prized by Señor Ferrant when he takes her onboard his ship at a port town to work for him: “Si le servi tant bien que a mervailles se tenoit pour content, ne oncques n’avoit trouvé ce disoit si bon serviteur; et se fazoit celle dame appeller Sagurat d’Afinoli | So she served hym so well that he helde hym contente meravyllously, for he founde never so good a servaunt; and this same woman called herselle Sagurat d’Affynoly” (II.52, Richards p. 364, cf. Curnow p. 917; Anslay sig. M3). Christine leaves out the detail Boccaccio mentions at this point that that the employer outfits Sicurano in better clothes [di miglior panni rimesso in arnese dal gentile uomo]; the more important aspect of identity is her unchanged virtue as a woman.

Rectitude has also made the argument that a good wife can be trusted as no other person can, as seen in the story of Belisare’s wife; the Sultan realizes this quality in Sagurat, in Christine’s retelling of the story: “tant et si bien servi Sagurat le soudain que il ne se fioit qu’en lui | soo well this Sagurat d’Affynoly served the sowdan that he trusted no man so moche as he dyde hym” (II.52, ibid.). This puts her in sharp contrast with Ambrose, as the deceiver is called in her version. She is not just another trickster who gets the better of him, but a woman who retains the same strength of fidelity as before, despite her necessary disguise. In both accounts, Sagurat and Ambrose cross paths at a market that she is overseeing on behalf of the Sultan. The moment when she recognizes her own purse and embroidered girdle among the other valuables he has brought to sell becomes a symbolically fitting moment of discovery. The items he stole without her knowledge now give him away, though he does not yet know it, and the empty trunks in which Ambrose hid

are replaced in the narrative by coffers enriched with goods taken at her expense. She patiently sets up a trap that will catch Ambrose out by his own words. Giving him signs of welcome, drawing him close, she employs tactics similar to those used by Artemisia to overcome the overconfident Rhodesian navy. Meanwhile, Sagurat circles back around behind Ambrose to send for Bernabo and to enlist the Sultan as an ally for the ambush that she has in mind. Of course, it is not a military campaign this time, but one conducted through courtly machinations, reminiscent of the way that Esther takes Naman by surprise when she reveals his plot against the Hebrews during a dinner party with her husband, the king. In other words, Sagurat shares an affinity with other admirable women in La Cité des dames who possess the cleverness to devise a creative solution and the steady courage to see it through. She uses her power advisedly; Christine phrases the depth of trust placed in her by the Sultan in such a way that she could have sought Ambrose’s death from a ruler with absolute power, based on her own word. Instead, she reveals his true nature as well as her own for all to see openly.

Christine tells stories that reinforce one another in subtle as well as overt ways to redress the view in Boccaccio’s writing that admirable women achieve success in masculine pursuits because they possess a masculine spirit. She reclaims legendary viragos as being admirable for the intelligence they use in achieving victory against superior force in the case of Thamiris and Artemisia. The Amazons and Zenobia are eventually overcome in military tests of strength, but their honourable conduct carries greater importance as the foundation for their renown. She refashions Boccaccio’s idea of a contemporary virago in a mercantile world by emphasizing how the attributes of a good wife deserve commendation, not condemnation. The reader might hear Reason’s laughter again, considering the similarities between Bernabo and the fool in the mill. He is too quick to believe what a companion tells him is truth, based upon physical signs rather than the inner conviction of what he knows to be true about his wife. Ambrose repeats the story of how Bernabo foolishly put his wife to death, as if it were a good joke. Sagurat, however, is no fool. Her success reverses a power dynamic when the audience discovers that women are more than they first seem. When Ambrose retells his story, with Sagurat at hand to correct it, the truth becomes clear. Similarly, Christine retells stories of Boccaccio’s viragos to reveal, as a woman, the essential truth of female nature.

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