

## BOOK REVIEW

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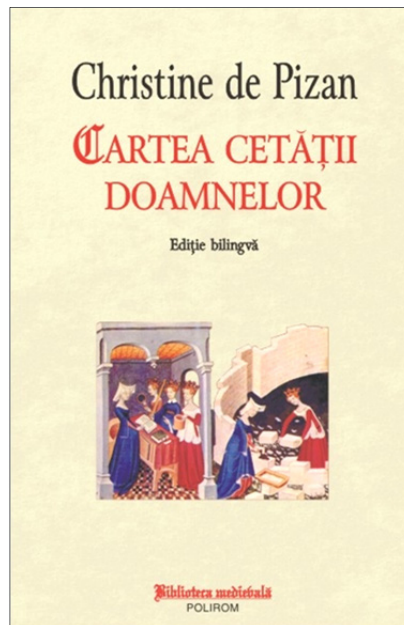
### Christine de Pizan, *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor* [The Book of the City of Ladies], Iași, Polirom, 2015, 745p.

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Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) is one of the first Western women scholars and professional writers. She was the daughter of the Italian physician and astrologer Tommaso di Benvenuto da Pizzano, who moved to Paris to work as the personal adviser to King Charles V, in the middle of the fourteenth century. As the daughter of the king's adviser, Christine de Pizan had access to the Royal Library at the Louvre. There, under the strict supervision of Gilles Malet, the director of the library, she was raised to become an educated woman. After many beautiful years spent in the Royal Library, at the age of fifteen, she married Étienne, a royal secretary. Unfortunately, her husband died 10 years later, and left her without any financial support. Moreover, she had to stand up to the creditors trying to collect her husband's debt (sometimes, even more than he owed them). In order to survive as a widow with children, she started to write various types of scholarly texts to earn money. In 1418 she retreated from public life and went to Saint Louis monastery in Poissy, where she spent the rest of her life.

Although during her short career as a writer she wrote poems, political texts like *Le livre du corps de policie* (1407) and *Le livre de la paix* (1414), and historical texts like *Faits et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, she is known today as a protofeminist, due to her representations of women's status and behaviour in the society of her time in *Le livre de trios vertus* (1406), and to her position against male superiority and for the creation of the perfect women's society in *Le livre de la Cité des dames* (1405).

The publication of *Cartea Cetății Doamnelor* [The Book of the City of Ladies], Christine de Pizan's best-known work, in a Romanian and French bilingual edition, in the collection *Biblioteca Medievală* [The Medieval Library] coordinated by Alexander Baumgarten at Polirom Publishing House in Iași is a welcomed development, because it brings before philosophers, philologists and readers interested in gender studies the only text written by a woman of that period which defends the image of women and in which the author describes an extraordinary utopian female city based



on models of women borrowed from history, religion and mythology. Moreover, as the author herself mentions in the first pages, she started writing this text after reading Mathéolus's diatribe, which described women as creatures prone to evil doings and vices, as did other authors of the time.

The translation of such a work must have been difficult due to the challenge of making a translated medieval text attractive to today's reader, but it is possible to say that Reghina Dascăl, the translator, managed to offer us a fascinating translation, which uses archaic language when needed, in order to make the reader feel as if truly reading a fifteenth-century text, but not to such an extent as to make the translation difficult to read. Moreover, the translator, an expert on Christine de Pizan's life and work, also offered a complex and useful introduction to the Romanian translation of *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Reghina Dascăl had already published a book in 2008 on Christine de Pizan's life and work, entitled *Christine de Pizan: Essays*. She is a Reader at the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, at the West University of Timișoara, and has published books and articles on British studies and gender studies.

Unfortunately, Christine de Pizan has been overlooked for a long time by gender studies researchers, because of the temperate way she approached the problem of the correct depiction of women, unlike the modern women authors, who imposed their opinions in their writings. Today, researchers, such as Reghina Dascăl, bring her personality and work back to the spotlight through extraordinary translations of her works and extensive academic studies, so that even an inexperienced reader can

learn about Christine de Pizan's contribution to challenging the representations of women and women's role in the patriarchal discourse.

*The Book of the City of Ladies* is divided into three parts. In each, the character-narrator is guided through the process of building the city of ladies by a woman embodying one of the three most important virtues: reason, rectitude and justice. In the first part, lady Reason helps Christine de Pizan lay the foundation of the new city by showing her that although women are mocked by the majority of authors of the time, not all women are attacked, but only those who are evil. These attacks, she claims, are warnings for the male readers to stay away from this type of women (119). However, there are also authors who mock women either because of their own vices or because of envy, and in order to combat these men and help Christine de Pizan build a solid foundation to the city, lady Reason offers the narrator examples of women who led cities or nations; were great warriors; were well educated; invented sciences, crafts or things useful to mankind; or had lived a good and peaceful life because of their intelligence.

In the second part, lady Rectitude advises Christine de Pizan to construct the buildings of the city with the bricks that she had prepared, which were actually sibyls, the prophetesses of the true God. Moreover, after raising the buildings of the city, lady Rectitude urges the narrator to find virtuous women to populate the city: wives who love their husbands; who help their husbands with advice; women who could shape the world, one way or another; who can hold secrets; who are educated and honest. She also suggests women known to have been loyal to their lovers, even if their lovers had not shown similar

loyalty in return; women who dress elegantly but are also virtuous; women cherished for their virtues, not for their affection; wealthy and generous women; and other virtuous women who lived in France at the time.

In the last chapter, lady Justice tells Christine de Pizan all about the most virtuous women living in the castles and the mansions of the city. The first among these women and the future governess of the city is the Virgin Mary, because not only is she the Queen of the city of ladies, "but she is the ruler of all the made things after her Son, whom she bore and conceived from the Holy Spirit and who is the Son of God, the Father" (557). The Virgin Mary does not live alone, "she is accompanied by her blessed sisters [...] Mary Magdalene" (561) and other sainted and holy women, who lived holy lives and, in many cases, died for their belief in Jesus Christ. At the end, lady Justice advises that virtuous women remain humble, married women be patient, virgins be simple, pure and serene and widows be pious, lest men be able to attack them anymore. Women are advised to follow the role models of the city of ladies.

Given the importance of Christine de Pizan, the Romanian translation *The Book of the City of Ladies* is more than welcome. It shows contemporary researchers and inexperienced readers that, although the Middle Ages produced numerous writ-

ings that mocked women and presented them as evil beings, there was, at least, one important text that defended women and presented numerous examples of virtuous women from the Ancient world and Christian history. Moreover, the work in question introduces the reader to a utopian city of ladies, similar to the community of Amazons from the ancient legends, but which is based on model women defined by Christian virtues. The reader will be surprised to discover that the book employs a didactic style, similar to the volume of letters published by the Italian writer Laura Cereta (1469-1499) and the poems written by Marie de France (1160-1215). Moreover, the style is also similar to that of books written by Queen Sohye (1437-1504) and Lady Hyegyeong (1735-1815) containing advice about the proper behavior of women in the Confucian Korean society of that time. Naturally, Christine de Pizan and the other women writers from the medieval period wrote for the Christian women of European societies, in general, in order to teach the ladies how to act so that men should stop misrepresenting them as evil. The connections one can make between Christine de Pizan and the above mentioned writing ladies show how different societies tried to contain women, and this is not only an issue of the past.

**SUCIU MARIAN**

suciu\_marian0@yahoo.com