Feminist Self-Fashioning

Christine de Pizan and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*

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In his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Stephen Greenblatt writes that during the 16th century the word 'fashion' came to be used as a term that indicated 'the forming of a self'. He suggests a use of the term 'fashioning' to mean the presentation of a 'distinctive personality', 'a characteristic address to the world' and a 'consistent mode of perceiving and behaving' (Greenblatt, 1980: 2).

Although Greenblatt's discussion is limited to male writers of the English Renaissance, I would suggest that his idea of self-fashioning, his analysis of the act of self-creation, can be very useful in an effort to understand Christine de Pizan's work. Specifically, a reading of *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or The Book of the Three Virtues* (1405) in the light of self-fashioning may help explain the book's intent.

The advice Christine offers to women in this book is sometimes criticized and questioned by contemporary feminists as a departure from her vigorous defense of women so eloquently presented in *The City of Ladies*.[1] In *The Three Virtues* Christine seems to caution women to keep their places and succumb to the will of men. I would suggest, on the contrary, that *The Three Virtues* is not a failing on the part of Christine. Rather, the book presents a very clever life plan for women, a survival manual actually in which Christine – aware of the dangers surrounding women's lives – proposes a solution. This solution is that women fashion a female self. Engaging in such an act of self-construction, women might not only find a female identity, and some safety, but a way for them to subvert their position of submission in a male-dominated world.

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Engaged in a life's work as a professional writer, Christine's 'consciousness' seems to assume the fashioning of a human identity. Such an identity was not only the 'manipulable, artful process' Greenblatt (1980: 2) describes, but one that was desirable and even possible for her to accomplish even if it meant overcoming myriad obstacles, both personal and public. On a personal level, Christine became a professional writer because she was left a widow with her mother, children and a niece to support. Whether she would have accomplished what she did had she enjoyed the financial support and protection of her husband or father, we can never know with certainty. In writing *Christine's Vision*, she chastises herself for having 'neglected learning' when her husband and father were alive (de Pizan, 1993: 118). She complains that the 'tasks common to married women' and 'the burden of frequent child-bearing' also kept her from her studies (de Pizan, 1993: 117).

Whatever personal misgivings she may have had were further exacerbated by the prevalent misogynist attitudes of the day, which demanded female silence. These attitudes, established on the authority of the ancient writers, pervaded medieval society in such a powerful way that it constituted what Howard Bloch (1991: 5) calls a 'cultural constant'. For a woman to take the step of becoming a writer in such an environment of misogyny was not easy. Aristotle's recommendation that women remain silent was the accepted rule.[2] Juvenal's attack on women in his Sixth Satire was widely read. According to the Roman writer, she 'who plays the critic', who 'lectures' and 'declaims' and who tries to 'seem too learn'd' is the most 'intolerable yet' (Juvenal, 1906: 125). The teachings of St Paul establishing silence and submission as the roles for women in Christianity continued to prevail in Christine's time. In his epistle to Timothy, Paul writes, 'Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit not woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent' (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1973: I Timothy 2: 11–12). Christine seems aware of this particular exhortation, as well as Paul's warning that women should stay at home and ask their husbands 'if there is anything they desire to know',[3] when, in *Christine's Vision* she tells the story of a man who criticizes her for her 'desire for knowledge' saying that it 'ill beseems a woman to be learned'. Her reply, 'that ignorance is [even] less seemly for a man since there is so much of it' (de Pizan, 1993: 119), reveals that despite such attacks, she was willing to engage in the 'artful process' required of her to fashion a self as a writer. In another instance, Christine recounts how Lady Nature soothed her fears by telling her that, like the woman who forgets birth pains after the child is born, ' "so you will forget the pain of labor in hearing the voice of your books" ' (de Pizan, 1993: 119). Here Christine combines the identity of mother with that of writer/speaker. The realization of this mother/writer self presents the female as empowering

metaphor and is part of the task of self-fashioning that Christine accomplished.

To have such a dual identity was virtually unheard of at the time and meant that Christine had to oppose herself to the patriarchal establishment. Greenblatt argues that self-fashioning takes place in relation to a 'threatening Other' which must be 'discovered' in order to be 'destroyed' (Greenblatt, 1980: 9). As Marilynn Desmond points out, Greenblatt's list of the Other includes the female in the guises of 'witch' and 'adulteress'. Using this idea of woman as Other, Desmond effectively argues that it is Christine's 'identity as a woman – and her culture's identification of woman with the Other – that must be negotiated and renegotiated in each of her texts' (Desmond, 1994: 196). I would suggest that the idea of the Other in *The Three Virtues* not be read as the position the female occupies in a patriarchal society. Rather, I would like to expand on the idea of Other and reverse the way it is usually employed. I suggest, therefore, that the Other in Christine's work are her male opponents. These opponents comprise both the male literary establishment as well as the misogynistic texts that often came out of that establishment. In seeing both the male and the opponents of women as Other, Christine constructs a new female–male relationship, a relationship that allows her to have a position of power. She becomes primary; the male attackers, secondary, the Other. The position of power she fashions grows out of Christine's belief that she was the one who would answer and refute the established misogynistic arguments of her day. She would attack the attackers; she would attack the Other. She would engage in the act of refutation both in her person, in her presentation of a female who fought back, and who argued publicly with Jean de Montreuil and Gontier Col and as such established a reputation for herself. Through these actions she fashioned herself as a writer, a person with a voice, a woman with a voice.

To become a writer is difficult in any case; but for a female, it is, as Cixous writes, a 'transgression'. Certainly, Christine's transgression to go against the established misogynistic order of the day, was to commit what Howard Bloch (1991: 47) calls a 'crime of thought'. However, in finding her voice and fashioning herself as a writer, she also had to confront her father and husband. In that confrontation, do they, as male, become Other too? Susan Stuard has written that 'according to natural law', men, husbands and fathers spoke for their wives and daughters (Stuard, 1994: 64). In such a situation, Christine cannot speak until husband and father are gone. When she does begin to write, she becomes one who surpasses or exposes[4] her father and husband. This position of surpassing those who have had authority, may be one reason why she often apologizes for her weakness and uses it as an authorial pose. She is, in a sense, sneaking into the position of writer, into the position the man occupies. Trinh T.

Minh-Ha describes women writers, 'learned women', as 'language stealers', because when a woman is 'able to read and write', she robs 'man of his creativity, his activity, his culture, his language' (Trinh, 1989: 19). In Christine's own time this idea seems most evident in *La Querelle de la Rose*. In the debate over the *Roman de la Rose* (de Lorris and de Meun, 1962), Jean de Montreuil, Gontier Col and Pierre Col are outraged that Christine would have the audacity to seize the power of language, a privilege they believe is rightfully controlled by men.[5] With extreme condescension, Gontier Col admonishes Christine to give up her 'error, folly, or excessive wilfulness' (de Pizan, 1978: 60). He attacks Christine for acting 'out of presumption or arrogance', and then promises to 'grant' her 'pity', 'mercy' and 'penance', if she will 'confess' her 'error' (de Pizan, 1978: 61).

It would seem clear, from reading such passages as these from *La Querelle*, that the 'Other' is Col and those men who attack Christine. It is also clear that Christine positions herself against such an 'Other' with vigor and a clear voice. Kevin Brownlee writes that by engaging in this debate Christine was able to 'establish and to authorize her new identity as woman writer, poet, clerk, within precisely those traditional literary discourses that had seemed to exclude this possibility' (Brownlee, 1992: 235). Throughout her career, in fact, Christine created her identity as a writer by opposing herself to the misogynistic strain within this literary world while also manipulating for her own purposes what Maureen Quilligan (1991) calls 'the prevailing master discourse'. Quilligan argues that, although Christine's work 'replicated in many elements' this 'discourse about femaleness', she 'also contended with and instated a difference' (Quilligan, 1991: 5). In doing this 'we see her ably maneuvering in the available discursive spaces' (Quilligan, 1991: 6).

In positioning herself against the male literary tradition, while at the same time staking out a place for herself within this very tradition, Christine fashioned an authorial self. In effect, she answers the 'threatening Other' when in *The City of Ladies* (1404) she refutes the standard attacks on women. But does she abandon this position when she writes *The Three Virtues*? Does she switch her allegiances to the threatening male Other and by doing so ventriloquize the voice that the contemporary male writers use when giving advice to women? I would suggest that the intentions of *The City* and *The Three Virtues* are really very similar and that Christine does not make a huge departure from her earlier work. In giving advice to other women in *The Three Virtues* she is telling them how to fashion a self that will allow them to survive and find safety. I would also suggest that her advice, which reads on the surface like compliance, is really a strategy for subversion. Christine wrote *The Three Virtues* she says to 'swell the number of citizens of virtue' who reside in the City of Ladies. When *The Three Virtues* opens, however, Christine, exhausted from

having built the City herself, needs to be fired up by three Ladies of Virtue – Reason, Rectitude and Justice. 'What, my studious daughter, have you already put away the tool of your intelligence and consigned it to silence?' (de Pizan, 1985: 31). Once again she pretends reluctance, weakness and a need for encouragement from the Virtues so that she can steal the discourse from the male writers, from the Other. Christine then rejects silence and asserts herself as a writer – 'I, Christine', will 'spread fine and noble nets' to 'tame' women so that they may be 'installed in the cage of our glorious city' where they may join those who are already 'sheltered' as 'sovereign ladies'(de Pizan, 1985: 32). These two notions – shelter and sovereignty – are crucial to Christine's purposes in *The Three Virtues* and key to an understanding of her goal of self-fashioning for herself and her sisters.

The City of Ladies is a utopian dream in which women live without men, exist in a world of dignity and self-respect and have control over their lives. The dream embodied in *The City* can be described, to use Greenblatt's words, as 'a new assertion of power'. Such an assertion in the culture, will, he says, always be met with 'the imposition of control' (Greenblatt, 1980: 2). If self-fashioning involves both assertion and then counter-control, this is what we see played out respectively in *The City* and then *The Three Virtues*. In fact, at the end of *The City*, the utopian dream constructed, Christine presents a prelude to the advice she offers in *The Three Virtues*; she turns her attention to the morality and restraint women will need to negotiate the dreams of *The City* in the real world. The glorious City, a 'refuge' for women, will 'guard' them and be a 'defense' against 'enemies and assailants' (de Pizan, 1982: 254). The reality, however, outside the City is one of danger – it is a 'threatening Other' from which the women must be protected. In *Christine's Vision* she writes that she came to the realization that the world is 'filled with dangerous illusions' (de Pizan, 1993: 118). In fact, throughout *The Three Virtues*, Christine paints a world in which women are subject to constant surveillance, threatened with the loss of reputation and honor, and forced to live with little financial power.

For example 'High-born' ladies may damage their souls if they take a lover, but in the earthly realm they face equal dangers: deception, disgrace and a destroyed reputation. Victims of gossip from all sides – from the false lover, family, friends, servants – the ladies and their actions are on display like public property. In a seemingly sinister world with enemies everywhere, there are those who would 'harm' even a virtuous lady trying to 'alienate her from the love and favour of her husband' (de Pizan, 1985: 69). The servant to the noblewoman is no safer. If the lady's actions are dishonorable, the servant must sacrifice her job to protect her own honor. The leavetaking, however, presents innumerable dangers to the chaperon who could find herself accused of disloyalty and so ruined

(de Pizan, 1985: 96). Widows are particularly vulnerable. Speaking from personal experience, she writes that the widow is greeted with the 'hard-heartedness' of former friends, treated to 'abusive language', humiliated by officials and defrauded of money (de Pizan, 1985: 156–7). Further, the widow's life, also on display, is prey to the gossip and suspicions of servants and neighbors.[6]

Facing such dangers, Christine offers a strategy for survival in *The Three Virtues*. This strategy, a self-fashioning involving a series of negotiations, is intended to help women overcome the Other while charting a course through dangerous waters to the place of safety and sovereignty she mentions in the opening of *The Three Virtues*. However, Christine does not seem to take a rebellious stance to accomplish this; rather she proposes what has been recommended by male writers before her: chastity, virtue, restraint.

However, by writing, as she says, for the 'profit' (de Pizan, 1985: 63) of women and their protection, she seizes control of a discourse previously controlled by men. Using a subaltern tactic, Christine takes the standard male advice, which contains the usual criticism of women, and turns it around so that it becomes a positive strategy for women. In effect, she adopts the language of the Other for her own purposes. She signals such a strategy when, in the prologue, she uses such words as 'tame', 'snared', 'caught' to describe how she will install women in the 'cage' of the City. With such language, Christine reverses the male ideological view of women by implying that women are wild in the world of the Other, but civilized in a female one.[7]

In the manuals of the time which were written by men telling women how to behave, chastity is imposed upon them and enforced by men so that women can be what Carol Vance (1984: 4) has called 'the moral custodians of male behavior'. In writing *The Three Virtues*, however, Christine does not advise chastity in the service of men; rather she seeks the well-being of women. Repeatedly, she cautions women against taking lovers and having intimate friendships with men. She also cautions against any contact with men beyond those who are family members because men are not to be trusted. Men 'make jokes behind the backs of the women' with whom they appear to be friendly despite 'whatever polite manner they may have adopted towards' the women to 'their faces' (de Pizan, 1985: 115–16). This warning comes from a desire to protect a woman from what Christine calls the 'countless perils and dangers' (de Pizan, 1985: 103) inherent in these relationships that can jeopardize a woman's honor. The advice offered to women is for their sakes and not for the sake of the patristic family. It seems, in fact, that a woman can really only safeguard her honor by avoiding men completely and choosing chastity.[8] She is most clear on this point when she discourages widows from considering remarriage. If married life 'were all repose and

peace', she writes, it might be a 'sensible' choice for women, but, she cautions, since 'one sees quite the contrary, any woman ought to be very wary of remarriage'. Younger women might find remarriage necessary or 'convenient', but for older women or those who 'are not constrained by poverty, it is sheer folly' (de Pizan, 1985: 159). Rejecting the idea of marriage, Christine is suggesting that single women can be safe as well as productive, productive, that is, without the burdens of a husband. Here Christine seizes the misogamous position that male scholars traditionally occupied. This kind of 'philosophic' misogamy 'advocates celibacy', believing that the scholar 'should devote himself rather to his studies than the everyday cares of family life' (Wilson and Makowski, 1990: 73). In another reversal, Christine positions herself in the place usually occupied by men, rejecting the Other, marriage and dependence. Despite the fact that she retained responsibility for her mother and children and as such became both caretaker and scholar, the absence of father and husband allowed her to write.

In the same way that she recasts the ideal of chastity to fit her purposes, she recasts the ideal of virtue. Conceiving of virtue in a way that anticipates Machiavelli's *virtú*, she suggests ways in which women can negotiate the dangers of daily life and preserve their own safety. For example, she advises the princess, who is the victim of malicious gossip, to be friendly to her detractors, pretending that she does not know of their lies. By *appearing* unaware, she writes, the princess

> . . . will use this discreet pretence and prudent caution, which is not to be thought a vice, but is a great virtue when it is done in the cause of goodness and peace without injuring anyone in order to avoid a greater misfortune. (de Pizan, 1985: 70)

This quotation sounds very much like Machiavelli's 'the ends justify the means', minus the bloodshed. Christine says that 'this kind of ''just hypocrisy'' is almost necessary' because 'it strives towards good and the avoidance of evil' (de Pizan, 1985: 72).[9] In fashioning herself and other women to be virtuous in this way, and in paying attention to the power of appearances, Christine anticipates Machiavelli's ideas, and Castiglione's in *The Book of the Courtier*. Her argument also coincides with Greenblatt who writes that some attempts at self-fashioning may at times suggest 'hypocrisy or deception' (Greenblatt, 1980: 3). Finally, she assumes that women have the power of language and as such can manipulate it for their own purposes.

Christine's recommendations for self-fashioning – from the way a woman dresses to the management of finances – involve restraint. Her advice, while echoing the sentiments of the male writers and critics of women, is written as she says 'exclusively to women' to 'teach' them 'the valuable methods of avoiding dishonour' and 'to give good advice for

following the right course of action' (de Pizan, 1985: 63). In order to realize this 'right course of action', she negotiates the concept of restraint in an attempt to secure both honor and safety for women. Greenblatt, citing Clifford Geertz's idea that culture is 'a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions . . . for the governing of behavior', argues that, 'Self-fashioning' is the 'Renaissance version of these control mechanisms' (Greenblatt, 1980: 3). Christine, by writing an advice/survival manual for women, is engaged in her own act of restraint. In her 'attempt' 'to fashion others' (de Pizan, 1985: 3) besides her self, she constructs 'control mechanisms' which she believes will help women survive, if they know how to play the dangerous game of taking some territory for themselves. In playing this game, Christine manipulates and negotiates the idea of restraint for her own purposes. Cautioning women at court to avoid friendships with men, she writes 'although it is unpleasant, submission is good when it prevents a greater wrong' (de Pizan, 1985: 116). The 'good' she presumes in this passage is the self-esteem and honor of women. At another point, she advises women to be 'resigned' to their husbands' 'perverse and rude behaviour', 'pretending' ignorance. To resist such a husband, she says, will not only lead a woman to dishonor, it is pointless. 'You must', she writes, 'live and die with him whatever he is like' (de Pizan, 1985: 64). In this harsh, but realistic passage, Christine makes it very clear that for a woman in this position, restraint and sometimes submission are her only choices.[10]

Christine would have us believe that the woman who submits, gains. If Christine's strategy is to help women negotiate a patriarchal world so that they can survive and find shelter, is this strategy then one of complacency? And if it is a strategy of complacency, is it really a giving in or does it only appear to be? Throughout *The Three Virtues* she advocates manipulation, dissimulation and pretense in order to protect women and further their cause. Perhaps her overall strategy in the text itself is also a manipulation, a manipulation which looks like submission but in reality is not. A part of self-fashioning for Christine might be what Greenblatt calls 'subversive submission' (Greenblatt, 1980: 8). Using such a subaltern tactic Christine's strategy seems to be a submission which subverts itself.

In Christine's work perhaps a great deal is being said between the lines of the writing, in the silences. The presence of such silence is crucial in Christine's work. Given the time in which she lived and the social forces at work on women, Christine did not have the choice of calling herself and other women to revolution against male oppression. However, within the silence, within the unsaid, she can say a great deal to lead women to safety. In *The City of Ladies* and elsewhere she attacks the misogynists by turning them into the Other, entering their male discourse and using it to refute the criticism of women. Christine never speaks directly to the anti-feminist tradition in *The Three Virtues*. However, within her advice to

women are the echoes of those very texts, the texts of the Other, which she attacked in *The City of Ladies*. In *The Three Virtues* this continued refutation may be implied; it may be silent, but its memory is present. Indeed, without those anti-feminist texts, without the Other to write against, Christine's advice book – and her other work – would not be possible.

In the same way that the anti-feminist tradition is silently embedded in Christine's advice book, so too is Christine's subversive advice silently present. Christine may not be able to speak the words of revolution to women, but, as a 'language stealer', she can capture the discourse of the advice manual and use it to give a voice to herself and other women. Throughout her writing she is conscious of fashioning her self as a female speaking to other females. In *The Three Virtues*, Christine envisions her power as author, expecting that copies of her book will be distributed all 'over the world without falling into disuse' (de Pizan, 1985: 179) to the benefit of all women. She believes then that her book will make a difference to women everywhere. Perhaps she is right, if hidden in her text is the message that women must subvert their submission to find the 'shelter' and 'sovereignty' she promises in the beginning of *The Three Virtues*. Women can attain this if they learn how to manipulate the male world through female behavior and language, even if it means that women must at times be silent. This silence, however, need not be one of submission; it can be one of power. In employing such a strategy, Christine inverts such rules of silence and submission as St Paul's and makes it work for women. Finally, by empowering women through her advice in *The Three Virtues*, Christine goes beyond a textual strategy to a social/survival strategy which grows out of a fashioning of the self, a fashioning which she believes is possible for herself and for other women.

NOTES

1. *The City of Ladies*, also referred to as *The Book of the City of Ladies*, was published in 1404.
2. Aristotle writes: 'So the poet Sophocles singles out ''silence'' as ''bringing credit to a woman'', but that is not so for a man' (Aristotle, 1962: 52). Within this first book of *The Politics* Aristotle also states that the man is superior to the female (Aristotle, 1962: 33) and that the soul within 'a female is inoperative' (Aristotle, 1962: 52).
3. The complete quotation is: 'As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is a shame for women to speak in the church' (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1973: I Corinthians 15: 34–6).
4. In her *Diary*, Anais Nin worries that writing is an 'aggressive act of creation'

which may steal 'man's creation' while 'exposing the father' (cited in Trinh, 1989: 19).

5. See Helen Solterer's *The Master and the Minerva* (1995) for a discussion of *La Querelle* and Christine's response.
6. Christine was most likely writing from personal experience on this topic too. In the *Vision* she writes: 'Was it not said of me throughout town that I had lovers?' (de Pizan, 1993: 114).
7. Marilynn Desmond argues that Christine employs a similar 'textual strategy' in *The City* by inverting 'the terms of misogyny, to say that women are prudent rather than foolish, chaste rather than wanton' (Desmond, 1994: 200).
8. Diane Bornstein (1981) argues that Christine makes a similar plea for virginity in *The City*.
9. Machiavelli writes that 'Everyone sees what you seem to be, few know what you really are. . . . In the actions of all men, and especially of princes who are not subject to a court of appeal, we must always look to the end' (Machiavelli, 1992: 49).
10. Commenting on this passage, Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser conclude: 'From the ninth to the seventeenth centuries, the vast majority of well-born and noble women could see no other alternative for themselves or their daughters' (Anderson and Zinsser, 1988: 350).

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