

**UCLA**

**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender (review)

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/70m354gg>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 32(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

**Author**

Kim, Dorothy

**Publication Date**

2001-10-01

Peer reviewed

## REVIEWS

**Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1999) xiv + 224 pp.**

Rosalind Brown-Grant's recent study of Christine de Pizan begins by considering the problem that contemporary feminist scholars have had with Christine's work. On one side of the feminist debate, scholars have lauded Christine for challenging the misogynist ideology of her time while praising her work as a precursor to important points in post-structuralist feminist theory. The other side of the debate has criticized Christine de Pizan for not advocating reform of the late medieval social order in her work or even for not suggesting the possibility of equal rights for women. Brown-Grant's answer to both these feminist camps is to point out the anachronistic criteria by which both groups have based their judgment of Christine's work. Both camps do not consider the original cultural context of Christine de Pizan's writing. This basic tenet of reading Christine's work in its historical context is the platform that Brown-Grant utilizes to open up the question of Christine de Pizan's "feminist" work. Brown-Grant's book reevaluates Christine de Pizan's prose by balancing a critical engagement of contemporary feminist scholarship with a lucid and meticulously researched reading of Pizan's texts in light of its historical and cultural context.

What ensues is a persuasive argument that explains how Christine, like so many of her male contemporaries, considered an author's role as primarily one that instructed and advised his/her readers in ethics and morality. Brown-Grant asserts that "it is this emphasis on ethics, rather than simply a desire to provide positive images of female characters, that gives Christine's work in defence of women a far greater unity than has often previously been thought" (3). She argues that Christine de Pizan's feminism is based "on a broader moral vision, one which refused to see virtue as an exclusively male preserve and which sought to prove that both sexes were capable of pursuing the universal goal of moral self-edification" (3). Christine de Pizan tailored this moral perspective on gender to each genre she wrote in as well as to each audience that she wrote for. Christine de Pizan's specific didactic purpose reveals much about how she shaped her defense of women with each specific reading audience in mind.

Rosalind Brown-Grant's study has two main criteria for deciding

which of Christine de Pizan's texts will be most fruitful in discussing her moral defense of women. Brown-Grant explains that all the writings discussed in her study were written between 1399 and 1405, a transitional period in Christine's writing between lyric court poetry and her later political and pious works. The five works that Brown-Grant uses as the foundation of her argument are all in prose because Christine generally agreed with the "traditional distinction in medieval literature between prose and verse according to which prose is reserved for works of a more serious nature, such as historiography or biblical exegesis" (5). Brown-Grant's organization in her book follows a pattern that focuses on each of the five prose works in five, separate chapters. Besides an introductory chapter and a conclusion, the five central chapters concentrate on the following works: *Querelle de la Rose* (1401–1402); *L'Epistre Othéa* (1399–1400); *Avision: Lavision-Christine* (end of 1405); *Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405); and *Le Livre des Trois Vertus* (1405).

The first chapter, "The *Querelle de la Rose*: Christine's critique of misogynist doctrine and literary practice," shows Christine's part in the famous literary debate about Jean de Meung's *Roman de la Rose* which establishes the moral basis of her criticism of misogyny. She condemns both the doctrine and the literary practice of Jean de Meung and his anti-feminist cohorts. Her ethical outlook compels her to criticize Jean de Meung's negative presentation of women as a central text in encouraging disharmony between the sexes which leads to immoral and un-Christian behavior. Christine's criticism of Jean de Meung centers on the medieval belief that the writer must also bear the mantle of moral reformer who must relate ethical instruction to the reader. Christine denounces Jean de Meung's misogynist text as immoral literary practice and this criticism becomes the centerpiece of her own position on misogyny which surfaces in later texts as well as the "theoretical and rhetorical underpinnings of Christine's own literary practice as moral writer" (10).

Chapter 2, "The *Epistre Othéa*: an ethical and allegorical alternative to the *Roman de la Rose*?" considers how, in the context of her criticism of Jean de Meung's misogynistic text and immoral poetic practice, Christine de Pizan's *Othéa* furnishes her male readers with an attack on and an alternative to Jean de Meung's misogynistic doctrine of love and his literary practice. Thus, Christine's *Othéa* becomes "an ethical and literary anti-*Rose*" (52). She accomplishes this feat through her own literary practice in which a *texte*, a story about a character

from classical mythology or Trojan history, is followed by a *glose*, in which Christine's authorial voice relates the moral importance of the *texte*. There are one hundred chapters in the *Othéa* and each concludes with an *allegorie* that explains the spiritual significance of the *texte* in order for the knight's soul to benefit from her instruction. Her literary practice directly criticizes and acts as a model against Jean de Meung's in his *Roman de la Rose* in which Jean's ambiguous position with his *texte* leaves his readers with an unclear moral lesson.

Chapter 3, "The *Avision-Christine*: a female exemplar for the princely reader," analyzes Christine's allegorical dream-vision in terms of its generic context. Brown-Grant contests that the genre "mirror for princes" rather than autobiography is essential in understanding the text as a unified work in which "Christine puts her self-representation as a woman at the service of her political goals" (89). The *Avision* becomes a mirror or a model to teach the implied princely reader how to act in his country's best interest by using Christine's life as an exemplar. Brown-Grant relates how Christine's comprehension of medieval political theory in which the relationship between the levels of the individual, the state and the world at large or the concept of microcosm and macrocosm "which probably derived from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*" is essential to the *Avision*'s political significance (97).

Chapter 4, "The *Livre de la Cité des Dames*: generic transformation and the moral defence of women," moves the discussion of Christine's defense of women from works devoted to male readers to works devoted to her female readers. Brown-Grant relates how in Christine's *Cité* text, the problem of misogyny is directly addressed and Christine presents an alternative historical view in which women's contributions are fully recognized and valorized in their own right. In terms of genre, the chapter moves from the instructor "mirror" for her male readership to a "commemorative catalogue of women's laudable deeds addressed" to her female readership. Likewise, Christine's rhetorical practice changes to look beyond gender for the essential humanity shown in her female examples, and the *Cité*'s focus on women's achievement becomes an indicator of and an exemplar for specifically female achievement.

Chapter 5, "The *Livre des Trois Vertus*: a betrayal of the *Cité*?" considers the sequel to Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*, the *Trois Vertus*. Similar to the *Cité*, Christine directly addresses her female readers. Her point, however, in the sequel is to give women con-

crete advice on how to live a virtuous life in the world. This pragmatic text which adopts the genre of the courtesy book continues the *Cité's* attack on misogyny by instructing her female readers on how their laudable, everyday actions prove that misogynists are in grievous error. Christine's courtesy book is addressed to all women of all classes and she considers all her readers rational beings who can "prove their moral equality with men by being taught to control their own behaviour and desires" (182). Brown-Grant concludes that Christine in the *Livre des Trois Vertus* constructs a "complete design for living which will enable them to reduce the partisans of misogyny to silence" (192). In essence, in this text, Christine empowers her contemporary readers to live a morally blameless life as well as to stand as a living refutation of misogynist discourse by following the tenets of this courtesy book.

The last chapter, Brown-Grant's brief conclusion, reiterates these points and brings Christine de Pizan's work of defending women back to the question of her place in feminist history. By analyzing her works in the context of Christine's own world, Rosalind Brown-Grant shows how Christine intricately used male modes of thought for her own ends and provided both her male and female readers with an "antidote" to misogyny's poisonous presence. Brown-Grant's study is consistently compelling, thoughtful, and groundbreaking. Particularly her discussions of genre throughout her study and medieval literary and political theory in chapter 1 and chapter 3 reveal a persuasive and meticulous argument that should persuade Brown-Grant's own scholarly readers of the merits of this book's feminist vision. *Christine de Pizan and The Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* not only contextualizes Christine de Pizan's work in light of medieval generic, historical, and cultural considerations but also must be lauded for tackling contemporary feminist criticism. Brown-Grant's work reevaluates Christine de Pizan's importance and place in the feminist canon as well as Christine's own feminist vision. Rosalind Brown-Grant's book would be a happy addition to the libraries of both medieval scholars as well as contemporary feminist critics.

DOROTHY KIM, English, UCLA