Christine de Pisan and
The Treasure of the City of Ladies:
A Medieval Rhetorician and
Her Rhetoric

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May all the feminine college and their devout community be apprised of the sermons and lessons of wisdom. First of all to the queens, princesses and great ladies, and then on down the social scale we will chant our doctrine to the other ladies and maidens and all classes of women, so that the syllabus of our school may be valued.

—Prologue to The Treasure of The City of Ladies (1405)

Almost five hundred years ago, Christine de Pisan addressed the "community" of women in medieval society on matters of honor and persuasive discourse. Her stated objective was to instruct them in the means of achieving virtue. Her lessons and vignettes, she believed, would demonstrate the humility, diligence, and moral rectitude of which all women were capable. Duly educated, Christine's "feminine college" would become worthy residents of the glorious City of Ladies, her allegorical refuge for women whose good lives refuted stereotypes of weakness and immorality (Book). The vehicle for her address is The Treasure of the City of Ladies (hereafter referred to as The Treasure), a syllabus that derived its power from her own experience. Christine's life was a model for the strategy and mother-wit that women needed to navigate the perils of a society often hostile to their gender.

A rhetoric for women and a literary artifact of early fifteenth-century France, The Treasure reflects both the late medieval and early Renais-

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sance characteristics of that transitional period. For example, in the first portion of *The Treasure*, Christine draws on Augustine and various other saints for advice on how the noble lady may achieve a love of God; this strategy echoes the style and concern of medieval scholastics. Yet she also refers to Seneca’s advice to speak kindly to one’s subjects, an indication that she and her audience were reawakening to classical humanist ideas (*Treasure* 48–49). On one level, *The Treasure* belongs to the genre of didactic works, which advised the medieval woman on her obligations as daughter and wife. On another, however, it encourages the development of individual women’s minds. It thus breaks with medieval scholasticism by promoting the Renaissance acquisition of secular knowledge as well as divine grace and also by promoting such activity for women.

*The Treasure of the City of Ladies* merits inspection by anyone looking for evidence of women’s lost rhetoric. Within carefully ordered chapters, Christine instructs the “feminine college” in the lessons they must follow to achieve both the good life and the good afterlife. She speaks through the allegorical figures of God’s daughters—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice—who represent the Three Virtues most important to women’s success. Through the secular examples of these Virtues, Christine directs all women to discover meaning and achieve worthy acts in their lives. Invested with the Virtues’ divine authority, Christine continues the work she began in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she and the Virtues constructed an imaginary city from the biographies of virtuous women. Her objective was to counteract the slander of the female sex so prominent in texts of the time. *The Treasure* prepares women of the age for residence in this sanctuary. By legitimizing women’s words, Christine’s advice affirms women’s worthiness in an androcentric world. Although she neither calls herself a rhetorician nor calls *The Treasure* a rhetoric, her instruction has the potential to empower women’s speech acts in both public and private matters. Her most important lesson is that women’s success depends on their ability to manage and mediate by speaking and writing effectively.

Christine de Pisan’s prolific poetry and prose, forty-one known pieces written over a career of at least thirty years (1399–1429), earned her fame as Europe’s first professional woman writer. During her lifetime, Christine achieved such credibility as an author that royalty commissioned her prose and intellectual contemporaries copied her manuscripts
into their libraries. After her death (ca. 1430) and during the bloom of the Renaissance, many authors acknowledged her intellectual influence and borrowed from her work (Yenal). Her writings remained popular, and eighteen manuscript editions of *The Book of the Three Virtues*, or *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, still exist (Willard, “Three Virtues”). Portuguese and Dutch editions of *The Treasure* date from the fifteenth century, and French copies were still being printed in 1536. Its precursor, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, was translated into English in 1520 and published in English by H. Pepwell in 1521 (Willard, “Three Virtues”).

On the whole, Christine’s work struck a responsive chord in a culture beginning to rediscover the value of classical philosophy and humanistic ideals. Her outspoken defense of women, however, was an anomaly in its time. Although it fascinates modern feminists, Christine was not an advocate of change in the social and gender hierarchies. Rather, Christine’s vindication of womanhood derived from her personal struggle to avoid the penury of widowhood. Her activism resulted from her literary self-education, part of her effort to prepare for a legitimate trade. In that pursuit, her encounters with popular misogynist texts—Ovid’s *Art of Love*, Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose*, and particularly Matheolus’s *Lamentations*—drove her first to despair of both womankind and her own femininity:

All philosophers and poets and ... orators ... concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice.... I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find ... certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was.... And I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman.... Great unhappiness and sadness welled up in my heart, for I detested myself and the entire feminine sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature. (Book 4–5)

As long as she accepted the “authorities’” perverted sense of the feminine, she was unable to help herself.

Soon, though, her “great love of investigating the truth through long and continual study” impelled her to speak out about “those outrageous villains who have assailed [women] with various weapons” (Book 10). Her readings of ancient history and her commonsense grasp of women’s worth informed her arguments; in fact, Christine had earlier entered the debate on courtly love as a female rhetor on behalf of women (Ward). Some popular works (such as Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*) sketched
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The lives of both mythical and historical heroines, and her family's association with the French nobility had acquainted her with several strong female figures. These resources gave her the materials with which to publicly refute woman-hating stories. As a result of her enculturation, Christine did not argue for equality with men, but rather for increased respect for the image of womanhood and for individual women within the existing social order.

As she explains in part of The Vision of Christine (1405), the profession of public didact and rhetor did not occur naturally to this woman, who had been taught to be only an obedient wife and mother. Born in Venice in 1364, Christine was the daughter of Tommaso di Benvenuto a Pizzano (Thomas de Pisan), a physician, professor of astrology, and councillor of the Republic of Venice. Her mother, whose own name is never mentioned, was the daughter of Tommaso Mondini of Forli, and married Pizzano after he had studied with her father at the University of Bologna. Not long after Christine's birth, Thomas de Pisan accepted an appointment to the court of Charles V of France, as the king's astrologer, alchemist, and physician, disciplines commonly allied during the Middle Ages.

Christine benefited from her father's extensive education and intellectual connections. Although she would later complain in The Changes of Fortune (1400-1403) that her education was limited by custom, the autobiographical passages in The Vision of Christine indicate that she enjoyed leisurely reading and wished she had more time to read and write. Indeed, literacy had become more common in the Middle Ages than is generally recognized (Stock). Letters and autobiographies from as early as the eleventh century document that wives carried on extensive correspondence with Crusader husbands, while tradeswomen kept records of both business and private matters (Beard 248-54). Christine lived among the intellectual elite, and the open atmosphere of Charles's court acquainted her with the rediscovered classics and humanism of the early Renaissance. She would fulfill her intellectual curiosity and claim her authority as a writer, however, only after she had been widowed.
in copying texts during her husband's tenure. Later, these abilities, augmented by the new intellectual climate, would literally save her from poverty.

Christine's marriage turned out to be affectionate and secure. With both her husband and her father well employed in the King's service, her family faced a prosperous future. Soon after the de Pisan-du Castel alliance, however, Charles V died and with the change in monarchy de Pisan's and du Castel's positions and salaries were reduced. Within a few years, both men died, leaving Christine as a grieving twenty-five-year-old woman, with three children, a niece, and her mother to support. She had no means of income and faced complicated lawsuits to recover salary due her husband.

In the autobiographical portion of her ballad *The Changes of Fortune* (1400-1403), Christine regarded this period as the turning point in her life, saying that her happiness and good fortune ended with her husband's death. In retrospect, she warned other widows of the unfair treatment awaiting them as socially disadvantaged women. Her *Vision of Christine* (1405) reveals that she, who had been "nurtured on the finer things of life," was completely unprepared to work to support her household (Petroff 338). She turned to a scholarly life of study and writing, partly because no other means of livelihood seemed open to her, partly because studying the classics consoled her grief, and partly because she had always wanted to be a scholar like her father and husband, but had not had the opportunity. As she explained it, "I had been naturally since birth inclined to study, [but] family affairs common to married folk took me away from such pursuits, and also the frequent bearing and care of children" (Petroff 338). Christine's connections to the French court probably gave her access to the royal library, to which Charles V had added vernacular translations of classical Greek and Latin texts on rhetoric and philosophy. Her self-education thus included history, science, and poetry from Greek and Roman authors as well as from contemporaries such as Dante and Boccaccio.

By 1393, five years after her husband's death, Christine was writing love ballads, which caught the attention of wealthy patrons. She was encouraged to write more and sell her work:

I made [the French nobility] a present of my new volumes; . . . they saw willingly and accepted with great pleasure. And the more I held to my unaccustomed image of a woman of letters, the more esteem came and
with it, dignity, so that, within a short time, my said books were discussed and circulated in various parts and countries. (Petroff 339)

By the end of the century, she was a popular author. By 1405, she had written “fifteen principal volumes, not counting other small ditties, which together fill about fifty quires of large format” (Treasure 19).

Christine’s growth as a rhetorician may have begun with the realization that her gender would cause her authority as a writer of serious prose to be called into question. Certainly she struggled to develop a style and ethos that would support a strong female perspective. Christine broke with the tradition of presenting learned texts in Latin, a language that for hundreds of years had been taught solely to men and that only unusually privileged women could read (Ong 113). Although her often prolix syntax mimics the multiple subordinate clauses of clerical Latin, most of her work is in the vernacular of the French court (Curnow 254).

Moreover, her lengthy allegorical poem, Road of Long Study (1402–1403), shows her stylistic debt to Dante. In his Inferno, Dante had credited his “long study” of Virgil for his decision to use the vernacular (Book xliii). Christine followed this lead, combining periodic Latinate syntax with French words and neologisms. By selecting the stylistic features she admired most from both classical and early Renaissance humanist authors, she created a unique vehicle for her lessons in morality and persuasion.

By the time Christine began to work on The Book of the City of Ladies and The Treasure, her self-perception and projected ethos had changed. Looking back on her early bereavement as the beginning of a new life, Christine asserted that at first she succeeded only because allegorical Fortune turned her into a man at the time of her loss, so that she would have the strength to fend for herself:

Then my mistress (Fortune) came toward me,
Who takes joy from many.
And touched me all over my body.

I felt changed all over.
My limbs were much stronger than before,
Which felt strange,
And the crying had stopped.
I felt most astonished.
And my appearance was changed and strengthened,
And my voice become deeper,
And my body, harder and more agile.
But the ring that Hymen had given me
Fell from my finger,

Which troubled me, as indeed it should
For I loved it dearly.

Now I will prove that
I became a real man.

(Le livre, in Bornstein 12–13)

Such a visionary narrative represented the deliberate creation of a self that could cope with unanticipated crises, something that the real Christine had not been taught to do (Petroff 22). Her imagined transformation is both sexual and emotional, suggesting the uncommon strength required of her for survival. Viewed in retrospect, this imputed gender transformation was a major step toward developing her authority as a teacher and rhetorician.

Christine’s portrayal of herself with stereotypical masculine traits also had a cultural, and somewhat prophetic, grounding. In the early fifth century, for example, Martianus Cappella’s Book of Rhetoric, contained within The Marriage of Mercury and Philology, personified rhetoric as a powerful woman, carrying weapons and clothed in armor, “the very image of Jupiter, able herself to hurl his thunderbolts” (in Miller, Prosser, and Benson 3). This image of Rhetorica as a strong, armed woman was a familiar motif in medieval illustrations (Vickers 11). In contrast, conventional medieval attitudes about women usually attributed the expected feminine qualities of tenderness, mercy, and compassion only to the Virgin Mary. Contemporary women were considered weak and less resilient than men, a characterization that Christine de Pisan used to an extent in her own early love ballads. By comparison, writers who praised a woman’s strength usually credited her with some male qualities while ignoring the stereotyped feminine traits of frailty, lack of resolve, and inconsistency (Shahar 169). When she claimed that Fortune had made her a man, Christine used such characterizations to her advantage. Her “change” allowed her to move toward a womanliness that would be acceptable to both female and male audiences. Then, when she felt comfortable enough to claim that women could speak authoritatively for their own gender, she gave allegorical woman-figures the same strengths as
In each case, Christine claimed a privileged vantage point in her analysis of women's roles in their own society. Christine's skilful use of persuasion and style derived both from her familiarity with the classical philosophers, rhetoricians, and poets, and from her familiarity with medieval rules for eloquence. In her own writing, she referentially referred to rhetoricians and to rhetorical eloquence as a goal the accomplished speaker and writer. Sometimes these references allowed her to present herself as a legitimate participant in literary discourse. At other times, she mentioned rhetoric in artful apologies, deeming her own eloquence while preparing to verbally demolish her opponent. In 1401, for example, de Pisan responds to Jean de Montreuil, who had written her a treatise defending the misogynist sentiments expressed in The Romance of the Rose. She begins by referring to her correspondent as an "expert in rhetoric" as compared to herself, "a woman born of subtle understanding and agile sentiment" (Petroff 340). She goes on to thank him for his "small treatise composed in fine rhetoric convincing arguments," a distinction that suggests she saw rhetoric as ornamentation and as separate from persuasive argument (Petroff 340). She continues her apologia, belittling her own style as not having pleasing arrangement and ornamentation, the marks of good rhetoric:

"And however much I do not possess great knowledge nor am I schooled in the use of subtle styles of language (from which I might know how to arrange words pleasingly and in polished style and order to make my ideas shine forth), I will not allow to be said in any way whatsoever a vulgar opinion of my understanding, merely because I do not know how to express it in ornate well-ordered words. (Petroff 345)"

Obviously, the elaborate apologia is itself an example of the rhetorical strategy she claims not to possess. By writing against the grain of her own writing, Christine uses the rhetorical figure of antiphrasis, a term she defines later through the voice of the Virtue Reason in the opening chapter of The Book of The City of Ladies (7).

Christine demonstrates that she knows a considerable amount of the classical rhetoric that she claims not to possess. She refers to classical rhetoric in artful apologies, deeming her own eloquence while preparing to verbally demolish her opponent. She begins by referring to her correspondent as an "expert in rhetoric" as compared to herself, "a woman born of subtle understanding and agile sentiment" (Petroff 340). She goes on to thank him for his "small treatise composed in fine rhetoric convincing arguments," a distinction that suggests she saw rhetoric as ornamentation and as separate from persuasive argument (Petroff 340). She continues her apologia, belittling her own style as not having pleasing arrangement and ornamentation, the marks of good rhetoric:

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ings. Through Reason, she displays her knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine and her facility with logical persuasion (Book 7). Through Rectitude, Christine exhorts honorable women "to say and uphold the truth" (Book 12). When she wants to rebut a common proverb that women should not speak or preach in public, Christine is reassured by Reason that "God endowed women with the faculty of speech" in complete good faith, so that even the news of Christ's resurrection could be carried by a woman (Book 28). When she wants to demonstrate the bias against women in classical literature, she cites Virgil as "more praiseworthy" than Ovid or Cato, who attack the character of all women (Book 24-25). In The Treasure, she refers to Seneca (49), and to Solomon's proverb on the persistent effect of good rhetoric, quoting "Proverbs in the twenty-fifth chapter: 'By long forebearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone'" (Treasure 51).

More important than Christine's familiarity with classic lessons on rhetoric, however, is her use of the allegorical Virtues to establish an authoritative feminine ethos. Her synthesis of experience and study had brought her to the conclusion that common stereotypes would not permit perception of women as credible sources of philosophy or social commentary. Her arguments on behalf of women might be discredited because of her sex. She had already risked such dismissal with her open attack on a popular ballad, The Romance of the Rose. Christine was the only woman who publicly and formally argued against the immorality popularized by The Romance. Her fame grew as she energetically defended women's integrity, which she believed was maligned by this allegory of courtly love. The Romance, begun around 1230 by Guillaume de Lorris and finished by Jean de Meun around 1280, had great appeal in the Middle Ages. Its theme was the seduction of a lady—represented as a jealously guarded prize rose—by her lover. The poem defends three principles of courtly love much admired in medieval literature, even if they were not practical forces in people's lives: that love is a wonderful kind of suffering; that the lover's virtue increases through his devotion to the woman; and that love cannot exist between husband and wife because of the forceful nature of the marriage contract. Theologians and intellectuals debated The Romance's promotion of questionable attitudes on love, morals, and women. In 1401, Christine argued that the allegory subverted public morality, extolled carnal acts, and incited licentious conduct, all the while purveying false notions of the true feminine character (Kelly 12).
She was supported by Jean Gerson, the chancellor of the University of Paris, against her main adversaries, Jean de Montreuil and the brothers Gontier and Pierre Col. Although *The Romance* remained popular, the public nature of the dispute yielded positive results for her career as a writer. First, it motivated her to refute other abusive, male-dominated literary treatments of women. Second, it established Christine's reputation as a female intellectual, a well-educated, outspoken woman who could argue effectively and defend her positions. And finally, it pointed to her character and credibility as a rhetor, important progress in the development of her ethos.

Participation in the debate developed Christine's self-confidence as an authoritative rhetor, to the point that she could argue with aplomb from a woman's perspective. Thus, she drew on Lady Reason as the source of logical argument in both of her influential treatises, *The City* and *The Treasure*. In *The City*, her description of Lady Reason reveals the persona of a woman who commands respect:

The famous lady spoke these words to me, in whose presence I do not know which one of my senses was more overwhelmed: my hearing from having listened to such worthy words or my sight from having seen her radiant beauty, her attire, her reverent comportment, and her most honored countenance.... She had so fierce a visage that whoever, no matter how daring, looked in her eyes would be afraid to commit a crime, for it seemed that she threatened criminals unceasingly. (8)

Here Christine was ready to rebut the "outrageous villains," and she no longer needed to rely on adopted male strength to do so. Instead, her feminine alter egos, the Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, would carry the arguments for their own gender.

These Ladies first appear to Christine as champions of womanly virtue. They lift her from despair over the misogyny of her times and set her to work on behalf of all women. As previously mentioned, Christine's rhetorical motivation for *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* derived in part from a chance reading of *The Lamentations of Matheolus* (ca. 1300). In his *Lamentations*, Matheolus describes in unsavory detail the wrongs that he believes women are guilty of perpetrating on men. In *The City*, Christine remembers that she had no desire to finish reading the harangue, but its subject matter continued to haunt her: here was yet another author who could write nothing but wicked and slanderous things about the general character and virtue of
women. Was it possible that woman had been created as a creature of less worth than man?

In response to Christine’s despair, three crowned women appear before her and announce themselves as God’s daughters. This constitutes the first chapter of The City (6–14). Their holy parentage and calm reasonableness present a feminine ethos of unquestionable authority. Through their voices, Christine can present what she sees as theological confirmation of women’s virtue as well as affirmation of her own literary authority. Together, she and the Virtues create a forum to speak on issues of consequence to all women.

In The City’s catalog of biographies, Christine affirms women’s worth and selfhood within the rhetorical framework of the Three Virtues’ answers to her questions. The epideictic effect of praising notable women imitates other medieval treatises written for women’s edification, such as Boccaccio’s De claris mulieribus (1355–1359) and Jean Le Fevre de Ressons’s 1371 Livre de Leesce (Curnow 126–27). Christine’s text differs from these in that its movement between question and answer is presented from a completely female perspective. Only female voices, examples, and opinions provide evidence. Logical progression from one example to the next permits Christine to establish truths about women that contradict the negative stereotypes, or “stones,” which she has identified in literature and popular myth. Each didactic story also represents a building block. The Virtues direct Christine’s construction of a walled city of words into which they will invite all honorable women, to protect them from unjust verbal attack. Every stone she digs up and discards undermines another slander against women; every block of granite that she places on the walls reconstructs a story of virtuous feminine behavior.

In The Treasure, Christine de Pisan turns her attention from the persuasiveness of The City’s role models to the persuasive effect of women’s speech and action in contemporary life. In each chapter of The Treasure, Christine’s advice reflects her concern about the inseparability of women’s private and public lives. The medieval lifestyle of family-centered politics and commerce took precedence over notions of personal and family privacy. Particularly for women of the nobility and the upper social strata, the actions and speech of private life were never far removed from public discourse and intercourse. Castles and manors were both homes and public meeting places. The “princesses, empresses, queens, duchesses, and high-born ladies” to whom Christine dedicated Book 1 of The Treasure were constantly in the public eye. Their marriages, childbirths, and deaths were as interwoven with politics as were their fathers’ and
husbands' declarations of war and peace (Beard 240–41). Given this reality, _The Treasure's_ lessons in self-discipline and chastity were indeed prudent rather than priggish, as a modern audience might think. A princess's governance of her own behavior had more than personal consequences. If she did not defend her chastity before marriage and her honor afterward, her family could suffer politically, socially, and financially.

Christine de Pisan's dedication of _The Treasure_ to Marguerite of Burgundy, then, evidences precisely such a concern for a young woman's vulnerable sexuality and potential influence. In 1404, the child's marriage to the Dauphin, Louis of Guyenne, was a political coup arranged by her father, John the Fearless (Willard, "Feminine" 99). It is not clear whether the father commissioned _The Treasure_ to guide his daughter through the moral and political perils of the French court or whether Christine wrote it to educate Marguerite in particular and socially active women in general. Either way, the book's preoccupation with chastity and honor, spotless behavior and reasoned speech, reflects very real concern for women forced to live their private lives in public.

_The Treasure's_ lecturing of women on such matters is not an extraordinary feature of the text, since other authors, including Boccaccio and the author of _Le Livre_, had also written treatises on the proper moral education of women. Instead, the most noteworthy feature of _The Treasure's_ rhetoric is its authoritative female voice. The first nine chapters of Book 1 of _The Treasure_ acknowledge the Church's power by speaking through daughters of a male deity, but these Virtues are informed by women's experience in medieval life and theology. When they warn the unnamed princess of the consequences of sloth, pride, avarice, and anger, they address her as "a simple little woman who has no strength, power or authority unless it is conferred on [her] by someone else" (43). This is not said as an insult, but rather as a protofeminist warning for the princess to understand the social infrastructure of her own life before attempting to influence it.

The Three Virtues—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice—focus the Platonic concern for the otherworldly in the first nine chapters in Book 1 of _The Treasure_. The princess is admonished to avoid the deadly sins, in part because it is a reasonable, right, and just way to live in the here and now, but especially because a woman's first concern must be to "account to God, for her life in comparison to the life everlasting is only a short time" (47). This preparation for the path to heaven was probably a genuine reflection of Christine's training and faith, and a reflection of the
fact that medieval life could be brutally short. Threatened by war, plague, and septic childbirth, even a noblewoman had to be prepared to face death at any time.

The Virtues divide The Treasure into three major sections of advice, according with Christine’s perceptions of three major divisions in the social hierarchy. Book 1 is addressed to princesses and other women of the nobility; Book 2 advises the women who serve those in Book 1; and Book 3 addresses every other sort of woman—wives of merchants, artisans, and laborers; widows, who are advised to remain single if they wish to regain control over their lives; young and old women; servants; virgins; prostitutes; peasants; and the poorest beggar. Book 1 is the longest of the three, not only because Christine believes that noblewomen have the most complex positions and responsibilities, but also because much of the same advice will apply to women in the other books (145).

In Book 1, Christine’s directions for accomplishing good works in the active life include models of effective speech with which the good woman can achieve humility and charity, which are steps to the pious life:

The princess will . . . speak softly . . . greeting everyone with lowered eyes. She will greet people in words so humane and so sweet that they may be agreeable both to God and to the world; . . . charity . . . is not to be understood as helping another person only with money from your purse, but also with help and comfort by your speech and advice wherever the need arises. (47)

Her directions for sweet reasonableness may seem excessive to modern audiences, but they were subtle exercises in achieving control over potentially volatile social situations. Once Christine has “sufficiently described the teachings that the love and fear of God” give her noble audience in Book 1, her rhetoric turns to practical matters (55). She instructs all women in the means of determining the best course of action in the medieval mix of private and political life. At this point the worldly subordinates the eternal, and Reason, Rectitude, and Justice surrender the podium to a more earthly apparition, Worldly Prudence. Here Christine anthropomorphizes other virtues to teach feminine morality, and has Worldly Prudence introduce Sobriety and Chastity, the restraints a woman must exercise to achieve honor. Prudence, Sobriety, and Chastity form a solemn triumvirate, complementing the other trio of virtues. Christine’s choice of earnest, temperate representatives is characteristic
of a rhetoric anchored in logos and ethos, rationality and good character. Certainly appeals to her audience’s feelings, an element of pathos, would also have been persuasive. But she was mindful that her detractors, ever ready to accuse women of unreliable emotionalism, could turn that mode of argument against her.

A review of Christine’s rhetorical lessons shows that while she maintained and advised an ethos of calm reasonableness for all audiences, she also balanced deliberative rhetoric, the art of decision making, with the epideictic, the art of praising and blaming (Aristotle 32). When making the argument that women must recognize and promote their own value, she credits women with the vital skill of peacemaking, a skill she believes men lack due to their hotheadedness. She persistently repeats that noblewomen should strive to achieve and maintain peace within marriage. Also, they need skills in forensic rhetoric for those times when they would speak on behalf of their absent husbands:

And so this lady will be... an advocate and mediator between the prince her husband (or her child if she is a widow) and her people... The good princess will never refuse to speak to [her husband’s plaintiffs], nor will she make a great show of keeping them waiting... She will reply wisely and suitably with the help of the good advice of [her advisors]; she will excuse her husband and speak well of him. (49)

The same skill in discourse would allow a wife to mediate between her husband and subjects: “She will speak to her husband well and wisely, calling in other wise persons if necessary, and will very humbly petition him on behalf of the people. She will show the reasons, which she will understand thoroughly” (80).

These passages exemplify the overlap of private and public concerns that characterized medieval life. Christine knew from experience that domestic and civil tranquillity were joint enterprises.

She also recognized that women had always carried the burden of war’s devastation, and she implied that rhetoric would be a better means of settling differences:

She will urge the people, her husband and his council to consider this matter carefully before undertaking [war], in view of the evil which could result from it... It would be much better to think of some more suitable way to reach agreement... In connection with this, Solomon says in proverbs in the twenty-fifth chapter: “By long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone.” (51)
This is a powerful argument for persuasion by means of rhetoric rather than direct force. Writ small, it appears in Christine’s advice to the new widow that she “will refrain from using hot and hasty words to anyone, but she will protect her rights; she will state her case or have it stated courteously to everyone.” Again, in Book 3, when she advises the “wise lady or housewife” that if her husband is “bad or quarrelsome, she ought to appease him as much as she can by soothing words.” Men are not directly the objects of Christine’s advice, but they are told that “some of them need it if they would be well instructed. . . . There are many men who are so churlish and so ignorant that they do not know how to see or recognize goodness and common sense” (80). Her instruction shows little patience for men who fail to recognize the value of their wives’ competence and eloquence.

Several times in The Treasure, Christine relies on rhetorical questions to show women the truth of a given situation and to lead them through lessons on morality. Early in Book 1, she assumes an unusual vernacular voice by using the persona of Christ to speak “home truths” to the princess, helping her negotiate the path to the well-lived life:

Oh poor woman, do you want to sink into such damnation and lose by your folly the grace that God promises you if you try to deserve it by only a little effort? . . . Which [path] will you take? (42)

Of course the answer is supposed to be self-evident—no woman of honor would deliberately risk eternal damnation. In another instance, Christine’s instruction has the practical quality of an inner conversation, a whispering conscience:

And what things therefore are more suitable to perfect one’s honor? In truth they are good manners and behavior. And what is the use of these good manners and behavior? They perfect the noble person and cause her to be well regarded. (55)

It is conceivable that such short dialogues were intended to be repeated and memorized by very young women such as Marguerite of Burgundy. Once Christine has established that skill in discourse should be part of every woman’s moral repertoire, she directs women to concern themselves more with speaking the truth than with persuasive eloquence. Sobriety begins by setting the parameters:
Sobriety will so correct, chastise and control the mouth and the speech of the wise lady, whom she will keep principally from talking too much (which is a most unseemly thing in a noble lady, or in any women of quality), that she will hate with all her heart the vice of lying. She will love truth. . . . This virtue of truth is more becoming in the mouth of a prince and of a princess than in that of other people because it is right that everyone should believe them. Sobriety will prevent her from saying any word, especially in a place where it could be passed on and reported, that she has not well examined. Prudence and Sobriety will teach the lady to have controlled speech and sensible eloquence, neither too solemn nor too frivolous. (57)

This instruction privileges the ethical practice of speech over personal assertiveness. If her words are not to place her in jeopardy, then a noblewoman's speech must be as spotless as her reputation. Christine proceeds with examples of occasions for prudent speech, each with its element of rhetorical strategy: “No dispute will be conducted [at the dinner table] . . . . She will speak to [dinner guests] in a thoughtful manner, with a pleasant expression; to the elderly people in a more serious manner, to the young people in a different and merrier one” (61).

In general, the strategy is to speak the truth yet bend to the occasion, rather than resist openly when no advantage can be gained. The possibility of compromise and peace always should be kept open. This advice pertains to intimate relations, too:

She will be overjoyed to see [her husband], and when she is with him she will try hard to say everything that ought to please him, and she will keep a happy expression on her face. . . . She will speak well of [her in-laws] and praise them. She will not allow herself to be drawn into arguments. (62–65)

These passages would surely help a teenager such as Marguerite negotiate life with her in-laws, particularly when she is bound to them by political arrangements more than by genuine affection.

The possibility that Christine de Pisan might have written The Treasure as a guide for a young princess bride in maintaining her honor in morally perilous surroundings is supported by the content and tone of chapters 23 through 26, which close Book 1. These sections are directed to women who must serve as chaperons to young noblewomen. Here Christine demonstrates that, even in roles subordinate to men's, women could increase their strength and influence by attending carefully to the
cause, appearance, and consequence of each interactive behavior, especially when speaking and writing. She expresses as much concern for the chaperon's sense of duty as for the young woman's honor, because the chaperon is held responsible for the other woman's speech and conduct. This scenario reveals the complex relationships between women as well as between women and men, and suggests that the community of women had much to gain by supporting one another in difficult situations. For example, if the chaperon notices that a knight, squire, or "certain" type of man persists in making overtures to her young charge, the older woman should draw him aside discreetly and say: "Without making you a very long sermon about this or going on at too great a length, I tell you quite briefly and once and for all, that so long as I am living and in her company, this young lady . . . will do no wrong" (91).

If the young lady in question behaves with "bad judgment" and continues a flirtation, Prudence advises the chaperon to leave her service with a carefully worded resignation, so that the lady's tainted reputation will not rub off on the chaperon. If she has left the young lady's service but still cares about both reputations, the chaperon may express her concern in a carefully worded letter, which should be delivered to its subject by a priest.

This insertion of an act of literacy into a text that otherwise deals with orality is carefully planned. By committing herself to writing, the chaperon establishes distance between herself, the knower, and the lady's act of dishonor, the known, thereby increasing her objectivity in the situation, and relieving her of responsibility for the affair (Ong 114). On the one hand, the cautionary letter that Christine dictates through Prudence is a deeply felt expression of concern for another woman's religious, moral, and physical well-being. On the other hand, it is offered as a pragmatic method for a servant to extract herself from potentially damaging circumstances.

Christine offers her analysis of the rhetorical significance of sending such a message by letter. She predicts specifically that the chaperon "will be compelled by great love to write to [her mistress] and recapitulate the warnings that she used to give her in case she might be able to benefit her after all, because what is written down is sometimes better remembered and penetrates the heart more than what is said orally" (Treasure 99).

Christine must truly have believed in the persuasive value of such a written plea, since she had previously included the same lengthy missive in her romantic poem The Duke of True Lovers (1401–1405). The letter
resembles a condensation of The Treasure’s advice, admonishing the married princess to “surpass all other ladies in good prudence” and to forsake “empty pleasure” (Treasure 99–100). As a written record of discourse, its length and the relative permanence of its medium suggest that it would be the record of note if the chaperon’s motive and objectivity were to be questioned. If intimate advice can have consequences equal to those of a public declamation, then both require documentation. In Christine’s time, what began as the ancient Greek tradition of oral persuasion on public issues had been transformed to sets of rules for, among other purposes, the conduct of private correspondence. Indeed, this letter proceeds in the textbook fashion of the ars dictaminis, with an ornate salutation and securing of good will, followed by sections of narration, petition, and conclusion: a complete piece of formulaic rhetoric (Murphy 3–4).

The chaperon’s last warning to her former charge reminds the girl of the potential for consequences in a public figure’s private behavior: “Thus the lady cannot blink, say a word, laugh or make a sign to anyone without everything being noticed and remembered by many people and then reported in various places” (Treasure 106).

Thus, Christine’s authority, amplified through Prudence and the familiar persona of the chaperon, instructs women to attend to all discourse, whether casual, deliberate, oral, visual, or written.

Books 2 and 3 of The Treasure contain more examples of practical applications of rhetoric to common needs: widows must be able to defend their legal rights in court; an upper-class woman must know the right things to say so that lower-class visitors will feel comfortable in her home; all women must be able to keep secrets for one another; housewives must manage with calm speech both quarrelsome servants and husbands; wives of merchants must know how to conduct business in their husbands’ absence; and both the very old and very young women must find the right words to bridge the generations. The Treasure’s historical context and pedagogical intent allowed Christine de Pisan to develop a woman’s guide to the use of rhetoric and to defend women’s intrinsic worth. She presented her female audience with models of successful rhetoric and with herself as the model rhetor (Willard, “Feminine” 113).5

Christine de Pisan wanted women to gain eloquence, but she also wanted them to gain skill with the persuasive discourse that could shape private and public affairs. As she concludes The Treasure, Christine expresses confidence that her directions will affect women’s lives: “This work will not remain useless and forgotten. It will endure in many copies
all over the world without falling into disuse, and many valiant ladies and women of authority will see and hear it now and in time to come” (180).

Christine directed women to speak and write for the good of society, and to affirm the best of themselves and their accomplishments in the world. The very fact that manuscripts of *The Treasure* are still being studied helps to keep alive the tradition of women as rhetors and rhetoricians.

**NOTES**

Jenny R. Redfern thanks husband Bob and son Jerry for their emotional support, and especially thanks daughter Joanna for her companionship and understanding during the two years when a dead French author competed for her mother’s attention. Cheers, Jenny.

1. MS 1528 is preserved in the Boston Public Library, a 1405 copy from the Paris atelier where the “Christine Master” worked.

2. The plate is from *Die Tarocchi: Zwei italienische Kupferstichfolgen aus dem XV Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1910). It may have been created by the painter Mantegna. The image of a strong, beautiful, armed woman can be compared to the image of the Queen of Wands in the tarot deck.

3. In a letter to Jean de Montreuil, provost of Lille, Christine writes: “As I am indeed a woman, I can bear better witness to the truth than those who have no experience of the state, but only speak through supposition or in general terms” (Willard, “Franco” 333–36).

4. Christine certainly passes judgment on behavior that might jeopardize a woman’s virtue (see *Treasure* 112 and 154, for example), but she does not suggest that women may participate in the judicial rhetoric of ecclesiastical or civil courts.

5. The Renaissance idea that texts could advise in the development of the model citizen or the perfect prince are also reflected in other works by Christine, such as *Epitre d’Othea, Livre du corps de policie*, and *Faits et bonnes meurs de Charles V*.

**REFERENCES**


