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Title

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Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 29(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

1998-10-01

Peer reviewed

**“NOW THE FIRST STONE IS SET”:
CHRISTINE DE PISAN AND THE COLONIAL CITY**

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Christine de Pisan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies*, along with most of the criticism that deals with it, predominantly and appropriately takes gender as its main interpretive ground. The work done in the last twenty years in articulating a version of feminist historiography concerning the site of her City has produced many tremendously valuable and significant readings, toward a more complex understanding of Christine’s text.¹ A largely overlooked but central component of her work, however, involves her selections and representations of specific non-European women, especially in Book I of the *City of Ladies*. By mythologizing and exoticizing her virtuous, non-European “others,” she necessarily works within the corollary textual strategy of colonialism, and writes a version of literary nationalism based on a colonial historiography. These strategies are unavoidably invoked in the service of Christine’s writing of exemplary women. Though these textual practices have not always been acknowledged in examinations of Christine’s work, they nevertheless converge in her City, jostling for attention and space. Through her uses of largely homogeneous and uniform feminine identities, *The Book of the City of Ladies* can be read as a document in an emerging literature of French national identity. The City—which “will be stormed by numerous assaults, [but] will never be taken or conquered”²—becomes an outpost of sorts, representing the erasure of ethnic, racial, and cultural alterity within the development of a gendered, Francocentric narrative of origins and destiny.

Historiographic Spaces and Colonial Prophecy

¹ See, for example, the essays in Margaret Brabant, ed., *Politics, Gender and Genre: The Political Thought of Christine de Pisan* (Boulder, CO, 1992); Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pisan’s Cite Des Dames* (Ithaca, NY, 1991); Sheila Delaney, “‘Mothers To Think Back Through’: Who Are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pisan,” in Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, eds., *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers* (Ithaca, NY, 1987), 177–197; Charity Cannon Willard, *Christine de Pisan: Her Life and Works* (New York, 1984); Lynne Huffer, “Christine de Pisan: Speaking Like A Woman/Speaking Like A Man,” in Edelgard E. DeBruck, ed., *New Images of Medieval Women: Essays Toward A Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1989), 61–72.

² Christine de Pisan, *The Book of The City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York, 1982), I.4.3. All references are to this edition.

In order to provide a more specific context within which to situate this aspect of Christine’s text, it might be useful to examine briefly the circulation of certain politically-intended prophetic discourses during her lifetime (*ca.* 1364–*ca.* 1430). Specifically addressing a practical level of the so-called Matter of the Orient, the Second Charlemagne prophecy was of particular interest at this historical moment. On Easter Sunday in 1386, for example, the mystic Telesphorus of Cosenza, a Francophile follower of the thirteenth-century prophecies of Joachim of Fiore, had a vision. Angels, he claimed, had instructed him to study the written prophecies of Cyril, Joachim, and others, and to pay specific attention to their considerations of the Great Schism, which had occurred in 1378. After a year of diligent application, Telesphorus made public his *Libellus*, which included the following prophecy:

Charles, the son of Charles, from an illustrious nation, and of a large stature, with a high forehead, large eyes, and aquiline nose, will be crowned king of France in his thirteenth year. Between his fourteenth and twenty fourth years, he will conquer the English, Spanish, Aragonese, Lombards, and Italians. He will then destroy Rome and be named King of the Greeks. He will subjugate the Chaldeans, Hispanos, Barbarians, and Palestinians...his deeds will be called holy; he will go to sacred Jerusalem and claim the Mount of Olives.³

In other words, Telesphorus was advocating the immediate French domination of Europe and the Holy Land, using the political and theological crisis of the Avignon Papacy as his authorization.

This anticipation of the coming of a Second Charlemagne was hardly idiosyncratic to this one joachimite mystic. He himself was building upon a tradition of French national self-definition, articulated through the careful opposition of a noble, legitimate conqueror to a pagan “East,” a conceptual structure that had developed some centuries earlier. Nor was this Carolingian Prophecy restricted only to religious modes; it had great currency and was contested in secular, and more explicitly political and literary, contexts as well. Philippe de Mézières, for example, takes up the prophecy in his *Le songe du vieil pelerin* (*The Dream of the Old Pilgrim*), written

³ Marjorie Reeves, “The Second Charlemagne,” in *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford, 1969), 328. For a fuller discussion of Telesphorus and the mystic tradition within which he wrote, see pp. 320–331. Reeves suggests that “from the number of quarters in which it turns up, it would seem that this Second Charlemagne text enjoyed the greatest vogue of any political prophecy” in the late Middle Ages. It was also detailed in Jean de Roquetaillade’s *Vademecum in tribulationibus*, written in 1356. See also M. Chaume, “Une prophétie relative à Charles VI,” *Revue du Moyen Age Latin* 3 (1947): 27–42, as well as Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “The Reditus Regni ad Stürpem Karoli Magni: A New Look,” *French Historical Studies* 7 (1971): 145–174.

between 1385 and 1389 for Charles VI, whose tutor Philippe had been. In a lengthy prose dream allegory, the Pilgrim travels to the mythic edges of the world and describes them fantastically. The final book of the work, borrowing from the mirror of princes genre, explicitly counsels the king in his duties. After lamenting the current “ruinous” state of France due to internal and external strife, and consistently comparing the king to Charlemagne and Moses, the narrator urges Charles to unify Europe and fulfill the terms of the prophecy:

Such an accord would be like manna in the wilderness, the wilderness of England and France, where Christians have shed Christian blood and have murmured against God. Once such a peace is established, you and the King of England can journey to the Promised Land and recover the Holy City, to the confusion of the enemies of the Faith and the exaltation of the Cross.⁴

Philippe reiterates this suggestion in his *Epistre au roi Richart*. This emerging narrative of predetermined mystic conquest, and the notion of a national identity which such conquest must necessarily include, was, here and elsewhere, legitimated through its frame of courtly language and tropes, and certainly by its dedication to Charles himself. In other words, this prophetic call to arms was less an expression of popular discontent than a contribution to a largely aristocratic notion of holy empire, one imagined as both nostalgic and already historical, which functioned as an inevitable extension of the very widespread version of the mythohistorical Trojan origins of France.⁵

This is not to suggest, of course, that Christine’s *City of Ladies* ought to be, or even could be, read as a straightforward allegorization of this specific prophecy at key textual moments; but rather it suggests that, as a conceptual framework for the text, mystic conquest in the interest of French self-identification is clearly at work in building Christine’s City. It is well-known that Christine had had direct contact with Philippe de Mézières; in 1392 she sold him the castle Mirmorant and its lands, which she had inherited from her father. Also, it has been argued that Philippe’s epistolary allegories were a major source for Christine’s *Epistre Othea*.⁶

⁴ Philippe de Mézières, *Le songe du vieil pelerin*, ed. G.W. Coopland, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1969), 2:71. See also Sandra Hindman, “Philippe de Mézières, Kingship, and Crusade,” in her *Christine de Pisan’s Epistre Othea: Painting and Politics at the Court of Charles VI* (Toronto, 1986), 144–156; and Jean-Louis G. Pichert, “De Philippe de Mézières à Christine de Pisan,” *Le Moyen Français* 13 (1983): 20–36.

⁵ See Colette Beaune, “The Political Uses of the Trojan Myth,” in her *The Birth of An Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late Medieval France*, trans. Susan Ross Huston (Berkeley, CA, 1991), 226–244. Christine herself explicitly reproduced the Trojan origin story in her *Le Chemin de Long Etude*, dedicated to the imperially-minded Duke Louis of Orléans.

⁶ Hindman, 144.

Clearly she knew the prophecy’s specific terms, reproducing them as she did in her last known composition, the 1429 “Ditie de Jehanne d’Arc,” which will be addressed in some detail below. Her more general interest in political prophecy is indicated by her praise of women prophets in Book II of the *City of Ladies*.⁷

The immediate political force of the Second Charlemagne prophecy aside, though, it is crucial to understand the constitutive elements of these “mystic” utterances in order to allow for a fuller account of Christine’s Orientalization of her selected non-European women. Among these elements is, most fundamentally, historiography as a process of cultural production, combined with well-defined notions of space and territory. As Michel de Certeau has suggested, “mystic literature belongs first of all to a certain topography.” This is based on a sense of physical place, certainly, but this *topos* quickly becomes a pretext of sorts for the terrain of social relations, or the interactions of social categories, forms of labor, modes of economic exchange, sexual relations—such as religiously-motivated celibacy or, in Christine’s case, widowhood—and gender identification. In other words, specific modes of social organization insist on their own versions of various topographies as historical, continuous, natural, even spiritual, phenomena. De Certeau continues,

mystics were for the most part from regions or social categories which were in socio-economic recession, disadvantaged by change, marginalized by progress, or destroyed by war. The memory of past abundance survived in these conditions of impoverishment, but since the doors of social responsibility were closed, ambitions were redirected toward the open spaces of utopia, dream, and writing.⁸

The historical moment in which Christine wrote, of course, was marked by instability; Charles VI suffered from frequent bouts of insanity, the Hundred Years’ War continued to weaken both the monarchy and national cohesion, and factionalism among Charles’s dukes eventually led to civil war, at which point Christine permanently fled Paris, due to the Burgundian occupation in 1418.

From this moment of crisis, within a social conception based on notions of changelessness, the utopian vision of mystic conquest and Franco-Christian universalism can be seen to have an easy appeal to a beset aristocracy. Whereas the Second Charlemagne prophecy articulated a region—“sacred Jerusalem,” “the Promised Land,” “the heathen East,” and so on—to be dominated, it was largely a reflection of other cultural representations of the East already in circulation. This delineation between

⁷ See especially her treatments of the Sibyls and Cassandra, II.1.1 through II.6.1.

⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” in his *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986), 80–100; see esp. pp. 83–85.

the familiar, “civilized,” space and the alien, “uncivilized,” Othered space—or, in Said’s well-worn phrase, the production of an imaginative geography⁹—is entirely arbitrary, in the sense that those who, in actual or textual terms, populate this domain need not acknowledge or even be aware of the distinctions that endlessly define them.

The “representativeness” of the East and the process of its textual conquest, of course, derive from the ideological contingency of historical writing, a genre within which Christine explicitly places the *City of Ladies*. The production of history is propped up by a version of political power that creates a “genuine” space, such as a national territory, a walled city, and the like, in which a series of cultural narratives are staged and restaged. This requires the alienation of those who occupy that region, in the interest of the formulation of a politically, religiously, racially, and nationally homogeneous lineage. This notion of the performance of historical antecedents as an act of legitimation for right rule is central to an examination of Christine’s project. As Lady Reason explains to her in one of the earliest moments of the *City of Ladies*, “you see me holding this shiny mirror which I have in my right hand in place of a scepter...thanks to this mirror, the essences, qualities, proportions, and measures of all things are known, nor can anything be done without it.” (I.3.2) In other words, the creation of a new foundational narrative for a mythopolitical nation must base itself on the “natural” reflections of its own forms. Christine inevitably will rewrite her *exempla* in her own image.

A national identity in this context is dependent on a number of elements; certainly among them would be the invention or resurrection of textual traditions, the “restoration” of pristine origins, the revival of historical languages, and generally, to use Ernest Gellner’s phrase, a “strategic amnesia” regarding one’s actual conditions of existence.¹⁰ This process of differentiation, or of enforced internal uniformity based on a conceptual leveling of the external, had been developing for some time before Christine’s career. As early as 1312, the Council of Vienne established a series of chairs in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syrian at Paris, Avignon, and elsewhere. This helped to produce the east as the East, and as quite distinct from Europe, by situating it within a textual and intellectual-disciplinary mode that then could be consumed by the French elite.¹¹ By 1450, not long after Christine’s death, John of Segovia, Nicolas

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 54. See also Roy E.H. Mellor, *Nation, State, and Territory* (London, 1989).

¹⁰ See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY, 1983), 1–7, 53–62. Also significant in this respect is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991). See also Earl Jeffrey Richards, “French Cultural Nationalism and Christian Universalism in the Works of Christine de Pisan,” in Margaret Brabant, ed., *Politics, Gender and Genre*, 75–93.

¹¹ Said, 50.

of Cusa, Aeneas Silvius, and Jean Germain staged a *contraferentia* with Islamic leaders, ostensibly to have an open exchange of religious ideology; the implicit purpose, of course, was the wholesale conversion of the Muslim world. As R.W. Southern explained, “[John of Segovia] saw the conference as an instrument with a political as well as a strictly religious function... He exclaimed that even if it were to last only ten years, it would still be less expensive and less damaging than war.”¹² Implicit in this is the suggestion that racial and cultural otherness can be accommodated within a version of Christian universalism. Failing this, however, the discursive production of “race” must occur in order for certain exclusionary practices to designate topographic and cultural boundaries. Strictly speaking, a national state does not have to have an ethnic base; or rather, nationalism is not simply an ethnocentrism, except, in Étienne Balibar’s phrase, as the “product of a fictive ethnicity.” Balibar continues,

The phenomenon of...‘racialization’ which is directed simultaneously against different social groups which are quite different in ‘nature’ (particularly ‘foreign’ communities, ‘inferior races,’ women and ‘deviants’) does not represent a juxtaposition of merely analogous behaviors and discourses applied to a potentially indefinite series of objects independent of each other, but a historical system of complementary exclusions and dominations which are mutually interconnected.¹³

For Christine, writing a non-European system of Others must necessarily rely on a type of presence of the past, or an endlessly historical present. In this respect, even her choice of French as a suitable language for the task of City-building expresses a nationalist impulse. A vernacular ostensibly is dispersed through a greater social range, and thus poses as a politically unifying force, or as one creating a fictive ethnicity of its own. In this, as elsewhere in Christine’s text, the idea of community must follow a precise blueprint.

Writing and Conquest: “The New Kingdom of Femininity” as Colonial Outpost

¹² R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1962), 108–109; see also Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Political Utility in Medieval Historiography: A Sketch,” *History and Theory* 14 (1975): 314–325.

¹³ Étienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism,” in E. Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London, 1991), 49; see also Wallerstein, “The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity,” in Balibar and Wallerstein, eds., *Race, Nation, Class*, 71–85. Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in H.K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990); he describes “the people” as a “complex rhetorical strategy of social reference,” 297.

By allowing these concerns to inform Christine's project in a fluid and less deterministic way, perhaps one can work to an extent against the dominant position of textuality to which she refers and defers throughout. In other words, by situating Christine's text as one element in a range of social relations, one may be able to avoid an overly simple imposition of "interpretation," a gesture that always embodies the risks of anachronism and of reproducing a version of textual colonization itself. The force required to execute this type of historical redefinition is, of course, a central concern of Christine's. In this respect, then, it is significant that the first historical narratives she addresses in the *City of Ladies* are those of Eastern women who demonstrate their exemplarity through their proficiency with weapons, specifically the use of those weapons in acts of conquest of even farther Eastern—and therefore less European—others. An examination of these woman warriors demonstrates their own overdetermination through the intersections of representation, conquest, literacy, history, and, to an extent, the emergence of market concerns. In this respect, the foundational narratives of Semiramis, Zenobia, and Dido are particularly instructive.

As a prelude to the representation of Semiramis, Lady Reason uses an explicit metaphor of labor as an instructional preparation for Christine. She tells her to "take the trowel of your pen and ready yourself to lay down bricks and to labor diligently, for you can see here a great and large stone which I want to place as the first in the first row of stones in the foundation of your city. I want you to know that Nature herself has foretold in the signs of the zodiac that it be placed and situated in this work." (I.14.4) This metaphor functions in two ways: first, the bourgeois woman of letters as laborer suggests a class location and an identity that can be transgressed only by the privileged, and also refers to Christine's status as a professional writer; and second, the production of a historiographic narrative, one that both uses and reproduces a culturally-specific "history," is identified as a type of cultural labor, from which a socially instrumental edifice will arise.¹⁴ Furthermore, Lady Reason demonstrates the intersection of the Natural, the Prophetic, and the Imperialist in her insistence on this particular example as the first among firsts, the absolute cornerstone of the City. Reason's determination here suggests that, in some respects, the demonstration of womanly prowess embodied in Semiramis is exemplary, not just on the level of meta-narrative, but also as a narrative pathway of sorts through which the

¹⁴ A useful study of Christine's interest in the mythographic is Eleni Stecopoulos, "Christine de Pisan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*: The Reconstruction of Myth," in Earl Jeffrey Richards, ed., *Reinterpreting Christine de Pisan* (Athens, GA, 1992), 48–62. See also Nadia Margolis, "Christine de Pisan: The Poetess as Historian," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986): 361–375.

conquest and re-signification of other imagined topographies and peoples may proceed.

Semiramis, of course, was an Eastern queen, wife of the King Ninus who had named Nineveh after himself and who had subjugated Babylon and Assyria.¹⁵ After the king’s death in battle, Semiramis carried on the prerogative of her social position: “to govern and rule the kingdoms and lands over which she and her husband held power, as well as those which they had conquered with the sword...” (I.15.1) In addition, Semiramis sought to extend and consolidate her colonial base. Because of her courage and aggression, Christine explains,

she was so feared in arms that, finally, she not only controlled the lands already in her power, but also marched with a very large army to Ethiopia, with which she subjugated Ethiopia and annexed it to her empire, and from there she moved in force against India. She attacked the Indians in force, whom no man had ever approached before with the intention of making war on them, and subdued and vanquished them, and then advanced against other countries so that, in brief, she had soon conquered the entire Orient and placed it under her rule. Along with these great and mighty conquests, this lady, Semiramis, reinforced and rebuilt the strong and cruel city of Babylon...[she] strengthened the city even more with many defenses and had wide and deep moats dug around it. (I.15.1)

The idea of the Orient here is represented on its surface by its constitutive regions—Ethiopia, India, and so on—but in order for this representation to line up with Christine’s purposes, the Orient itself must be contiguous, continuous, and homogeneous. By attacking and subduing “the Indians,” for example, Semiramis can accommodate a conflation of the individual, racially- and culturally-specific inhabitants of this mythographic region into the very terrain they had held; Indians become “India” in its most abstracted sense, as India likewise disappears into the “Orient.” Through the act of military conquest, an equivalence is forced between the cultural difference embodied in “India” and “Ethiopia”; empire here is shown to be based on geographical, political, racial, and cultural generality, with subjective specificity excluded. In contrast, Semiramis is fundamentally separable from the landscapes she occupies; the freedom and inevitability of her movements prevent her from “becoming” a place. In other words, her colonial agency is formed precisely by the distinction between her own identity and these imagined geographies. The colonial act simultaneously

¹⁵ For a survey of various representations of the figure at this historical moment, see Irene Samuel, “Semiramis in the Middle Ages: The History of a Legend,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 2 (1943): 32–44. Also useful is Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, CT, 1977).

produces a conceptual territory and an autonomous historian of that territory.

Further, Semiramis's power as a colonial agent is clearly marked on her body. When one of her regions revolts against her, the announcement comes while she has only one side of her hair braided. In Christine's words, "she swore by her own power that the other lock of hair...would not be braided until she had avenged this injustice and brought this land back under her domination." (I.15.1) As a self-authorizing agent, Semiramis is able to define the specific terms of "injustice" and to mark that upon herself as her colonial administration requires. Eventually a bronze statue is raised in Babylon showing Semiramis bearing a sword and identifiable by her distinctive hair.

Here, she is figured as a desiring woman only insofar as the focus of that desire is territory and power, not sexual relations. Regarding this, Maureen Quilligan argues that "for male authors, Semiramis stands for an instance of the primal scandal of female shame. For Christine, Semiramis feels no shame. She must therefore exist prior to what Christine specifically terms a scripted, male-authored law. She is free to do whatever she wants: she is free to act, autonomously. Semiramis thus represents a freedom which is unscripted and unbound by law at its most radical, originary foundation."¹⁶ This reading of Semiramis as utopically acting prior to legal and other regulatory constraints has some significance here. Christine is willing to accommodate the traditional charge of this conqueror's mother-son incest since it had not yet, in historiographic terms, been expressly forbidden by statute: "At that time, there was still no written law...all people were allowed to do whatever came into their hearts." (I.15.1) By offering this as a justification, which is in itself a kind of foundational precondition, Christine demonstrates a claim she will sustain throughout the *City of Ladies*: that the female body, and more specifically the body of the female colonizer, potentially can redefine itself and thereby derive a form of cultural power, access to which later was largely blocked by a "male-authored law."

The statue of Semiramis, for example, is simultaneously a spatial, territorial, cultural, and historical marker, as well as a type of regulatory control; but it is also, in Christine's text, a representation within a representation. In other words, if Semiramis's unbraided hair becomes a marker for colonial domination on a narrative level, then Christine's own reproduction of that marker on a meta-narrative level redefines it as a site of European cultural power.¹⁷ If Semiramis takes the Orient as her

¹⁶ Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority*, 84; see also pp. 69–85 generally.

¹⁷ A useful examination of this problem of reappropriation is Robert Bartlett, "The Image of the Conqueror," in his *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1350* (Princeton, 1993), 85–105.

subject, then likewise does Christine take Semiramis as her own. By attempting to recover a universalized model of powerful, virtuous femininity, Christine inadvertently reinforces the representational practice that traditionally marked Semiramis as a trope of Eastern militarism: exotic, logically asymmetrical, mysteriously sexual, dangerously other. For Christine, this cornerstone narrative, spurred on by the inevitability of Nature’s prophetic utterance, functions as a model within which the rewriting of history can proceed.

Although Lady Reason has told Christine that, through Semiramis, “now the first stone is set in the foundation of our city,” (I.15.2) it is a stone that apparently needs to be continually reinforced. The intersection of representation, racial difference, and conquest is reformulated and amplified in Reason’s *exemplum* of Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrenes. A descendant of the Ptolemies of Egypt, Zenobia demonstrated early in life a presumably intrinsic “chivalrous inclination” and a passion for hunting, out of which she would “attack wild beasts fearlessly and conquer them marvelously,” (I.20.1) a narrative instance that compels an analogy between bestial prey and later military aggression against an already-demonized Other. Her husband, in Christine’s version, decided to campaign against the Persian King Sapor, who at that time “unrightfully” occupied Mesopotamia, and he gave Zenobia command of part of his army. Christine continues:

The end of this affair, just as you can read in history books, was as follows: this lady Zenobia conducted herself so bravely and courageously and with such boldness and strength that she won several battles against the Persian king, and so decisively, thanks to her prowess, that she placed Mesopotamia under her husband's rule. In the end she laid siege to Sapor in his city and captured him with his concubines and great treasure. After this victory it happened that her husband was killed by one of his own relatives out of jealousy, but it did not help the relative at all because this noble-hearted lady kept him out of power; she bravely and valiantly took possession of the empire on behalf of her children, who were still small.... (I.20.1)

Christine, then, defers to an authorizing textual tradition—“just as you can read in history books”—in order to represent a near-Eastern colonizing force acting against an even more Eastern, and therefore more geographically and culturally transgressive, militaristic king. She uses here standard markers of Oriental opulence: Sapor is captured with his concubines and wealth; Zenobia, conversely, is monogamous and acts in the political interests of her “children,” who include her own people as well as the newly subjugated Persians. In a pre-Christian world, Christine implies, Christian values can still be “discovered,” and these are asserted here at least partially through topographic space: the further west, the

more moral, and the further east, the more decadent. Zenobia's colonial agency, as was Semiramis's, is further authorized by bodily signifying practices. We are told that "when she rode out in arms, which happened frequently, she did not speak to members of her army unless she was in armor, with her helmet on her head, nor did she ever have herself carried on a litter, although the kings of this time all had themselves transported in this manner." (I.20.2) Here Christine foregrounds Zenobia's ambiguous gender role-playing. By taking up the markers of martial power, Zenobia maintains her mobility, claims control over her own representation, and can use this descriptive authority to fix the distinction between land and subject, all of which is determined by her fundamental "virtue."

The alignment of this version of virtue with a model of Western Christianity is further emphasized by her literacy. "With all this having been said," Christine asserts, "the high point of her virtues which I have to tell was, in summary, her profound learnedness in letters, both in those of the Egyptian and in those of her own language...she knew Latin as well as Greek, through the aid of which she organized and arranged all historical works in concise and very careful form." (I.20.2) If one accepts the proposition that the ability to write generally is claimed to be a basic condition of civilization, and that certain forms of identity are based on this—or, put another way, that one's subjectivity must first be "written" in cultural terms—then the convergence of historical writing and linguistic and military conquest produces here a form of genderless European subjectivity written on the site of the virtuous heathen. Christine clearly uses this representation in her Francocentric description of the East. In other words, Christine's conqueror is so thoroughly dominant as to have conquered, "in concise and very careful form," the category of historiography itself. The use of history as a structure of domination has the specific effect of producing a doubled version of colonial identity. In this respect, Zenobia fills an ambiguous and equivocal position. She is both conquering historian and conquered subject of history; she is a mythographic Oriental in compulsory compliance with the political practices of the fifteenth-century French elite.

The question of social class and its increasing instability becomes quite central for Christine in her treatment of Dido, a story which will problematize, or at least allow for a greater degree of complexity in, the model of colonial and national historiography she has put in place up to this point. Another narrative of expansionism, the episode of Dido makes it explicit from the outset that "the way in which she founded her city and acquired and took possession of her land demonstrated her exceptional constancy, nobility, and strength, and without these graces true prudence is impossible." (I.46.1) Fleeing from court strife and factionalism, Dido constructs the fiction of a pilgrimage to a holy place in order to make her

escape. That place turns out to be Africa, here a central marker for a non-European unknown. Upon her landing there,

the people in that country immediately came to look at the ship and its passengers. After they saw the lady and realized that her followers were men of peace, they brought them many provisions. And the lady spoke to them graciously and told them that, because of the good she had heard recounted about this country, they had come to live there, provided that the natives agreed, who thereupon indicated their willingness. Pretending that she did not wish to make a very large settlement on foreign land, the lady asked them to sell her only as much land on the beach which a cowhide would enclose....This request was granted to her, and once the conditions of the sale were drawn up and sworn between them, the lady then demonstrated her cleverness and prudence: she took out a cowhide and cut it into the thinnest possible strips and then connected them together, and spread them out on the ground around the port and which enclosed a marvelously large piece of land.... In this manner this lady acquired land in Africa, and within this enclosure a horse's head was found. According to their divinations, they interpreted...this to mean that a warrior people, exceptionally valorous, would inhabit the city to be founded there.... (1.46.1-2)

A colonial narrative with noteworthy differences from the preceding ones, this episode functions within a more explicit model of market economics, which is itself dependent in part on Christine's expansionist foundations. To begin with, there is an insistence that Dido and her followers are not a military expedition intent on conquest. Coextensive with this, there is a consistent representation of the Africans as distinct, separate, and therefore alienable from the land they occupy; they are given at least the provisional status of "the people," "the natives," and so on. This distinction allows for their redefinition as economic subjects, rather than as "simple" colonial subjects. The Africans are not going to be conquered and militarily ruled; they will be displaced and economically ruled through restricted access to the port.

In this case, the violence of conquest is equated with the violence of language. In the face of Dido's ambiguously-worded "cleverness and prudence," the Africans' strictly literal reading of the contract distorts not just the sale, but their own self-determination. Writing on colonial historiography, Richard Waswo has commented that "to justify dispossession is the new and almost exclusive aim of the rewriting of the story...unmanured and unimproved, the land is also unpraised and unsought by merchants—unprofitable. In this state, it doesn't even deserve a name. The land gets named only when it becomes a commodity. It becomes an object of language and an object of exploitation at the same time. To the exploitation of agriculture is added that of commerce: the

blueprint for the transmission of Western civilization is now fictionally complete.”¹⁸ Dido, of course, names her “marvelously beautiful, large and strong city” Carthage, thereby enforcing the boundary drawn by the strip of cowhide. Her land is continuous but discontinuous; it is adjacent to the vast, uncivilized wilderness of which it once was a part, but it represents a profound conceptual break with that wilderness. It is in Africa, but not of it. This paradox is made possible, of course, by the manipulation of legal and economic structures, the “conditions of the sale,” or the terms of the contract, of which the natives by design would have little understanding. Christine, then, has written a Dido—a Phoenician, a trope for “trader” since antiquity—who embodies some of the anxiety-provoking “cleverness” of a newly emergent merchant class, a social group about which Christine expresses ambivalent sentiments.

Christine expresses this equivocation about class mobility somewhat more forcefully in her *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, a moral, and moralizing, continuation of the *Book of the City of Ladies*. In it, she recommends that the wise princess will welcome and maintain good relations with lawyers and especially with merchants, so that in case “she were to have any difficulty and if she needed some ready money, these merchants, being well-disposed toward her, would gladly help her.”¹⁹ Later, however, she strongly warns that “even if those [merchants] who indulge in such excesses, whether in clothing or in grand style, left their businesses and took up the fine horses and status of princes and lords, their real social position would still dog them...such people can be called disguised people.” (III.3) In other words, Christine concedes the political uses of the merchant class, but still attempts to essentialize and naturalize their social identity to reassert a somewhat nostalgic separation of estates.

Dido, in many respects, focuses this anxiety. She is a shrewd and careful writer, but of business documents; her wealth is hereditary, but also entangled in the commodification of land and these specific colonial subjects; her property in Africa is legitimated and authorized by prophecy, but also by a reflection of an idealized European acquisitional strategy, based on the enforced consent (“provided that the natives were willing”) of the seller.

Christine, then, has rewritten Virgil-as-authority in order to accommodate a feminine subject that poses as autonomous, but in fact herself functions as a type of textual colonial subject, a racial and cultural Other used to promote specific political ends. Dido, of course, is given a greater degree of “European” legitimacy due to her association with the

¹⁸ Richard Waswo, “The History That Literature Makes,” *New Literary History* 19 (1988): 541–564.

¹⁹ Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, trans. Sarah Lawson (Middlesex, England, 1985), I.16.

Aeneid, the tradition of the *translatio studii*, and the French cultural history derived from it. As all historical writings are rewritings, and thus are ideologically contingent, this historiography is already bound by the forces of commodification of the originating, foundational instances Christine strives to reconstruct. This moment of ambivalence in her text might be read as a type of retrograde narrative of stable and fixed gender and class divisions; but it is precisely the interplay of these categories that forces her own approach somewhat out of her control and into a broader and overdetermined cultural and national(ist) context.

Writing on the historical, international dissemination of Western ideology, Marx commented that “it compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls ‘civilization’ into their midst, *i.e.*, to become bourgeois themselves. In a word, it creates a world and a history after its own image.... Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made ‘barbarian’ and ‘semi-barbarian’ countries dependent on civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West, and so on.”²⁰ Dido, in this context, clearly imposes a version of contractual social relations on an “Africa” that ostensibly could not otherwise acknowledge such relations. The enclosed port becomes a historiographic space within a space, a defining and determining region, a presence which forces a dislocative absence. If Christine were creating a textual world and history in her own image—and it would be impossible to do otherwise—that image could be only partially that of a dissenting female writer. Her class position, dependence on patronage, and the broader contexts of civil and international war and emergent mercantilism have intersected to produce some of the particular building-blocks of her City: ethnic, racial, cultural, and national alterities drawn inside the strip of cowhide into a transhistorical model of French “sameness.”

Conclusion: Christine de Pisan and Joan of Arc

Having fled the Burgundian occupation of Paris, Christine retired to the *abbaye close* at Poissy in 1418 and ceased her literary production altogether for eleven years. When this silence was broken, however, it was in the form of a brief, highly political, and explicitly nationalist poem in praise of a “genuine” woman warrior. The “Ditie de Jehanne d’Arc,” completed on July 31, 1429, is largely consistent with her earlier gender- and class-specific praise of the exemplary woman acting virtuously through Divine love; it also demonstrates a remarkable series of confluences of time,

²⁰ Karl Marx, *On Colonialism* (New York, 1965), 14. See also B.S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London, 1978).

racialization, and national identity. In stanza XXXIX, for example, referring to renewed English incursions on French soil, Christine writes:

And so, you English, draw in your horns
 For you will never capture any good game.
 Don't attempt any foolish enterprise in France.
 You have been check-mated.
 A short time ago, when you looked so fierce,
 You had no inkling that this would be so;
 But you were not yet treading the path
 Upon which God casts down the proud.²¹

She suggests here not only an image of the godly peasant woman as national savior, but quite significantly represents the English as bestial. Further, she uses the legal term *l'Englecherie* throughout—obsolete by the time of the poem's composition, although still bearing a strong pejorative sense²²—to describe them. One may suggest, then, that the re-signification of national identity on an inert and passive body had a specific exchange value in this instance; this took the form of a devaluation based on the imposition of national and cultural difference. Christine simultaneously disparages the English as the “dead dogs” she elsewhere calls them and commodifies them within competing nationalist discourses.

She then goes on to conflate Joan and a feminized French national identity, and to project future conquests:

She will destroy the Saracens, by conquering
 The Holy Land. She will lead Charles there,
 Whom God preserve. Before he dies he will make
 Such a journey. He is the one who will conquer it.
 It is there that she is to end her days
 And that both of them are to win glory.
 It is there that the whole enterprise
 Will be brought to completion. (XLIII)

There is an interesting leveling here of the political-historical English with the mythical-historical Saracens, or the imposition of an equivalence of the dangerous and the exotic. She reproduces both the non-European non-Christian and the non-French Christian as a provisionally homogeneous Other; both of them stand for a version of trespass or

²¹ Christine de Pisan, *Le Ditie de Jehanne d'Arc*, ed. and trans. Angus J. Kennedy and Kenneth Varty. Medium Aevum Monograph Series, 9 (Oxford, 1977), 46.

²²In Norman-occupied England, the so-called “presentment of Englishry”—that is, the offering of proof that a murder victim was English rather than Norman—had been a method by which a community might escape the fine that would have been assessed, had the victim been Norman. It was abolished by statute in 1340.

unauthorized possession—for the Saracens, the seizure of Jerusalem, and for the English, that of parts of France. If, for Christine, it is a tentative analogy, the differences are of little importance; she is awaiting the Second Charlemagne:

For there will be a king of France
 Called Charles, Son of Charles,
 Who will be supreme ruler over all kings.
 Prophecies have given him the name
 ‘The Flying Stag’ and many a deed
 Will be accomplished by this conqueror
 (God has called him to the task)
 And in the end he will be emperor. (XVI)

When a French nationalist ideology is consolidated and embodied, Christine implies, then international difference will no longer need to be staged.²³ In other words, the struggle for representational dominance here functions as a prelude of sorts to a transition to a universalized world with France at its center, from which race, class, gender, ethnicity, and such divisions shall have been elided. With the coming of the Second Charlemagne, the notion of difference will vanish and a “city of ladies” will no longer need to be built.

The prophetic vision of a Francocentric European domination of the East expressed by Christine de Pisan throughout the *City of Ladies* and elsewhere in her work is, among other things, a response to the tremendously unstable political climate in which she wrote, as well as to the political conservatism of her class position. Although Christine writes explicitly within and about the category of gender, it is crucial to consider the terms, rhetorical strategies, and cultural assumptions she brings to bear on her representations. By insisting on a transhistorical, transcultural model of sameness among all women, she inadvertently reasserts other versions of cultural difference that were at least as pronounced in her time as the category that she defended as her own territory. Through Christine’s (re)writing of past,

²³ Among useful examinations of the textual relation of Christine to Joan are Deborah Fraioli, “The Literary Image of Joan of Arc: Prior Influences,” *Speculum* 56 (1981): 811–830; and J.-C. Muhlethaler, “Le poète et le prophète: Litterature et politique au XVe siècle,” *Le Moyen Français* 13 (1983): 37–57, who suggests that Christine’s nationalist rhetoric transports her into “l’état euphorique.”

present, and future history, she demonstrates the inescapable political and ideological “moment” of such a project.

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