

2017

# Christine de Pizan's The Book of the City of Ladies as reclamatory fan work

E. J. Nielsen

University of Massachusetts Amherst, [enielsen@umass.edu](mailto:enielsen@umass.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication\\_grads\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_grads_pubs)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

Nielsen, E. J., "Christine de Pizan's The Book of the City of Ladies as reclamatory fan work" (2017). *Transformative Works and Cultures*.  
6.

[10.3983/twc.2017.01032](https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.01032)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Graduate Student Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

## Praxis

### Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* as reclamatory fan work

E. J. Nielsen

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, United States*

[0.1] *Abstract*—In what ways can medieval texts be looked at as fan works? How might the rhetorical tools of fan studies or affect theory aid in further understanding of these texts? Likewise, can we use medieval understandings of literary production to look at modern fan works in order to complicate our contemporary ideas of authorship? Here I consider how Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*) can be read as a reclamatory fan work addressing issues of representation and gender within both the texts it responds to and the larger culture within which the work is situated. Moreover, contextualizing de Pizan's work as fan work can help fan scholars by locating fan studies within a broader literary history. By reframing these earlier works of literature as part of a longer history of women's writing that also involves the works being done today within modalities of fan writing, and by reconsidering fan works as part of a historical continuum of women's writing, we, much as de Pizan herself did, create a theoretical space that historicizes, contextualizes, and indeed valorizes women writers of both fannish and nonfannish works.

[0.2] *Keyword*—Affect; Giovanni Boccaccio; Fan fiction; Gender; Medieval studies

Nielsen, E. J. 2017. "Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* as Reclamatory Fan Work." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 25.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.1032>.

---

## 1. Introduction

[1.1] Yet here stand women not simply accused, but already judged, sentenced, and condemned!

—Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (c. 1403)

[1.2] These are my characters now, and the characters of fellow fans—I rely on myself, and other fic writers, to push them forward.

—Elizabeth Minkel, "Harry Potter and the Sanctioned Follow-on Work" (2016)

[1.3] A woman enters into a public debate over a problematic yet popular text, arguing that, among other things, it "speaks ill of women" (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1997, 41). Eventually, frustrated by the debate and by a general climate she finds misogynistic, she channels her thoughts and feelings about the depictions of women in the media into her own work, which strongly references a well-known work by a male author. She creates a text that uses female characters drawn from earlier works to tell a story subverting existing narratives about women, creating a narrative space within which she can see herself reflected.

[1.4] While this story is one that plays out daily on social media and in contemporary fan works, it also dates back hundreds of years. The woman referenced above is the medieval author Christine de Pizan, and her work, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*), was written in about 1403. As I will argue here, it is possible, and indeed potentially illuminating, to approach medieval texts through the lens of fan studies. In what ways can medieval texts be looked at as fan works? How might the rhetorical tools of fan studies or affect theory aid in further understanding of these texts? Likewise, can we use medieval understandings of literary production to look at modern fan works in order to complicate our contemporary ideas of authorship?

[1.5] Early in 2016, *Transformative Works and Cultures* published volume 21, a special edition explicitly focused on "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," with the word "classical" serving as a shorthand for Greco-Roman, medieval, and early modern material. Editor Ika Willis notes that

[1.6] the existence of this conceptual isomorphism [between Classical literature and contemporary fan fiction] suggests a shared practice and, importantly, a shared aesthetic between fan fiction and Classical literature—that is, between one of the most delegitimized, lowest forms of cultural production in the contemporary world and one of the highest and most valued. Attending to the similarities between these two communities of practice thus enables us to invert and displace the high/low binary and to expand and nuance our model of transformative work. (2016, ¶1.3)

[1.7] Anna Wilson has stated that "there is also a need for a more comprehensive study of immaturity and affect in medieval 'fan fiction'—that is, texts that enter into and consciously engage with the imaginative world of another" (2015, 2). On the medievalist side, the 2016 International Congress of Medieval Studies offered a panel titled "Fan Fiction in Medieval Studies," while several recent articles have also considered the relationship between Shakespeare and modern fan culture. Here, I join that conversation by considering how de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* can be read as an affective, reclamatory fan work addressing issues of representation and

gender within both the texts it responds to and the larger culture within which the work is situated. Moreover, contextualizing her work as fan work can help fan scholars by locating fan studies within a broader literary history.

---

## 2. Contextualizing Christine

[2.1] Of course, we cannot simply call Christine de Pizan a fan author any more than we can unproblematically call her a feminist author, as both are contemporary terms that do not map directly or easily onto earlier periods of history. Many of her attitudes toward gender, though incredibly enlightened for her time, would strike the reader as intensely problematic today, such as her advice to married women at the end of *The Book of the City of Ladies*: "Don't despair at being so downtrodden by your husbands, for it's not necessarily the best thing in the world to be free" (1999, 238). Even the word *author* is fraught terminology when applied to creators of the medieval period—a situation with which fan studies scholars may find themselves intimately familiar. In "Women and Authorship," Jennifer Summit argues for a multiplicity of meanings for the idea of authorship during the Middle Ages, complicated by issues such as modalities of production and dissemination of texts, ideas of originality and authority, and even the idea of literacy (2003, 92–93). For example:

[2.2] The *auctor*...is abstracted from the material realities of writing; his authority has no beginning or end and appears to stand outside of time. For living writers, in contrast, the act of writing was bound up in the wider social and historical networks of patronage, scribal reproduction and circulation. Those networks undermine the apparent autonomy of the *auctor*. (2003, 92–93)

[2.3] Minnis's *Medieval Theory of Authorship* defines an *auctor* as one whose work was judged to be both "intrinsically worthy" by conforming to accepted "Christian truth," and to be "authentic" by being the work of a known auctor, an admittedly somewhat cyclical notion (2010, 10–12). Contemporary ideas of individual authorship driven by individual inspiration and producing what we conceptualize as original work therefore have limited relevance to the medieval period.

[2.4] The issues discussed above existed for all medieval authors, but the gender politics of the period meant that they had a greater effect on women writers than on their male counterparts. Indeed, in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a spiritual autobiography and travelogue written in the early 15th century, Margery Kempe's struggle to get her autobiography written down suggests that the very act of creating the text may have served as another form of penitentiary spiritual labor for "this creature"—as Margery describes herself throughout—to endure for the greater glory of

God. Margery, who was herself illiterate, was afflicted by a first scribe whose transcription of her story is discovered to be "so badly written that he [the second scribe she brought it to] could hardly understand it, for it was neither good English nor German, nor were the letters shaped or formed as other letters are," and only her direct divine intercession can "purchase him [the second scribe] grace to read it and also to write it" ([1501] 2001, 4).

[2.5] De Pizan is likely the woman writer of the Middle Ages who hews most closely to our contemporary understanding of what an author is. The general outlines of her life are known, unlike those of Margery Kempe or the possibly pseudonymous Marie de France, thanks to her own semiautobiographical work "The Vision of Christine." Christine makes no negotiated claim to quasi-authority through the medium of divine authority, as female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen or Julian of Norwich do, but instead grounds her texts in scholarship and learning that, while not wholly analogous to modern scholarship, at least accord with medieval male scholastic practice. Indeed, her literary career began around 1401, when she entered the so-called *querelle de la Rose* and went head to head with some of the best-known scholars in Parisian literary circles to argue about misogyny and misinterpretation in Jean de Meung's *The Romance of the Rose* (*Roman de la Rose*, c. 1230–75), a popular allegorical poem of courtly love. In *The Romance of the Rose*, the male figure of the Lover, aided by figures such as Friend, Honesty, Venus, and Pity, and opposed by figures such as Jealousy, Danger, and Chastity, must go on a quest to reach, woo, and seduce his love, the (female) Rose. In the *querelle de la Rose*, Christine publicly opposed the work, arguing that "Jean de Meung's negative representation of women leads to disharmony between the sexes and thus to immoral and un-Christian behavior" (Brown-Grant 1999, 10).

[2.6] Christine has been described as the first professional woman writer, a role that was, interestingly enough, necessitated by both her social class and her gender. These prevented her from receiving the court appointment that many male writers of the period relied on for security—indeed, her father was court astrologer to King Charles V, and it was this appointment that gave Christine access to an exceptional education. She started writing poetry for money after the death of her husband in 1380, and several subsequent lawsuits forced her to start supporting herself and her family financially. Perhaps most importantly from a standpoint of *auctoritas*, she was educated enough to supervise the copying and even illustrating of her own works. Thus, when Christine presented Isabeau of Bavaria, the queen of France, with a copy of her collected works (preserved in the British Library as MS Harley 4431), which is illustrated with a frontispiece depicting a stylized scene of the same presentation, she is in control of both her own text and of her own image, supplying Isabella and future readers with a self-portrait of Christine as author. This professionalism, noteworthy

even during her own time, would seem to be at odds with thinking of de Pizan as fan author or of her work as fan work, areas usually defined at least within the popular understanding by their perceived amateurism and distinct lack of monetization. I argue, however, that it is not paid remuneration but instead Christine's attitude to her own work and the works against which she is defining herself that make her also function as a fan author.

[2.7] Fan fiction is of course also a term, and often a spelling, of some contention. The "most narrowly defined" idea of fan fiction used by Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson in their introduction to *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (2014) is as " (sometimes purposefully critical) rewriting of shared media," a form that they then date to the 1960s. They admit that a wider definition, as a "response to specific written texts," would clearly include medieval and other premodern texts. The widest definition included in their discussion calls it a form of "collective storytelling," in which case fan fiction can be dated back to Homer's *Odyssey* (2014, 6). All three of these definitions can be applied to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, as it responds not only to the larger medieval canon but also to specific, well-known texts, especially Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung's *The Romance of the Rose* (c. 1260) and Giovanni Boccaccio's Latin biographical collection *Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*; c. 1370). However, the above sets of prefatory definitions do not include several aspects of fan works that many fan scholars also consider important to the discussion of such works, and which is of particular importance when considering de Pizan: the fact that the majority of fan fiction authors are women and noncisgender men, the role of the community in which the text is designed to be read, the affective nature of fan works, and the potential role of the fan work as a resistant reading to both the dominant text and the dominant culture that is performed by marginalized bodies. As Anna Wilson says, "the affective quality of fan fiction—and its implications—could potentially be overlooked or erased through scholarship that identifies it too readily with classical literature" (2016, ¶2.10). Aja Romano (2016), writing on the popular musical *Hamilton* as fan work, argues, "The fundamental objective of fan fic, especially when it is written by women, queer and genderqueer people, and people of color, is to insert yourself, aggressively and brazenly, into stories that are not about and were never intended to be about or represent you." Christine inserts herself, both aggressively and brazenly, into the quarrels of scholarly men on the merits of the *The Romance of the Rose*. Soon afterward, she produces a book that is part collection of exemplary biography and part a mirror for princes—both genres dominated by male authors. It should be noted that not all fan responses are inherently resistant; fan works may represent either "desire for 'more of'" (that is, an affirmational relationship with a text) or a "desire for 'more from' a source text" (that is, a resistant reading) (Wilson 2015, 26). These are not mutually exclusive desires, even within the same fan work.

---

### 3. Curating a city of women

[3.1] Like her contributions to the *querelle de la Rose*, de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a response to and a critique of both a specific, well-known text (in this case both *The Romance of the Rose* and *Famous Women*) as well as to themes and motifs extant within the larger literary culture of the period, a relationship with the earlier texts that can be defined, as Henry Jenkins describes contemporary fan fiction, as containing "not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism" (1992, 23). In *The City of Ladies*, Christine, in a manner similar to the self-insert allegory of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308–21), describes how she is visited by the figures of Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. They explain to her how and why women have historically been maligned by men and enlist her in the construction of an allegorical City of Ladies as safe dwelling place for all women of virtue. To build this city, the Ladies share with Christine examples of historical and contemporary women who are "worthy of praise" (1999, 11). The list includes women rulers, artists, scholars, warriors, inventors, and prophets, in addition to the more typical wives, virgins, and holy women. However, *The Book of the City of Ladies* is not simply a critical response to earlier texts. It is also a stand-alone literary work that affectively answers back to and repurposes the original textual canon sources to create something new and reparative, making it, I argue, explicitly a fan work.

[3.2] Here, Christine responds to Giovanni Boccaccio's curated and interpreted list of both famous and infamous women in *Famous Women*—"I will adopt a wider meaning and consider as famous those women whom I know to have gained a reputation throughout the world for any deed whatsoever" (Boccaccio 2001, 11)—with her own list of explicitly praiseworthy women while also defending women more generally as being praiseworthy. "Our [the Ladies] wish is to prevent others from falling into the same error as you [Christine] and to ensure that, in future, all worthy ladies and valiant women are protected from those who have attacked them" (1999, 11). Christine also borrows the motif of the walled and thus fortified city so important to *The Romance of the Rose*. One of her opponents during the *querelle*, Pierre Col, had already used this motif, comparing his attacks on her to *Fol Amoureux's* own actions in pursuing the Rose, who in *The Romance of the Rose* represents both the specific woman being pursued and women in general. Thus Pierre rather creepily cast himself in the role of the stronger, male, and ultimately successful opponent to Christine and "reiterat[ed] Jean de Meung's representation of women as less than human and a race apart which Christine herself had denounced" (Brown-Grant 1999, 19). However, Christine's *City of Ladies*, unlike the walled garden of the Rose, which exists as an obstacle to be overcome by cunning and treachery, is instead akin to the inviolate City

of God described by Augustine of Hippo in his work of the same name (Morse 1996, 232).

[3.3] Boccaccio does not feel a need to apologize for or justify his choice to write *Famous Women*. Instead, his preface contents itself with noting that "some women have performed acts requiring vigour and courage" (2001, 9), and thus he will write his work as a "way of giving them some kind of reward" (2001, 13), especially pagan women, whom he feels are otherwise underrepresented. These women, while deserving, must still be gifted with representation at the hands of a learned man. Furthermore, unlike his previous collection of biographies, *On the Fates of Famous Men* (*De casibus virorum illustrium*, c. 1360), *Famous Women* does not have an overarching frame narrative, and when Boccaccio chooses to make general asides to his reader, they appear within specific chapters. Christine's frame narrative—which has more in common with Boccaccio's earlier work than with *Famous Women*—offers a vivid description of her despair as she sits in her study and wonders if she herself, and indeed all women, are truly the "vessel in which all the sin and evil of the world has been collected and preserved" (1999, 6). It is an issue of representation with which marginalized groups within today's media structure would unfortunately still be intimately familiar. "This thought inspired such a great sense of sadness and disgust in me that I began to despise myself and the whole of my sex" (1999, 7). Boccaccio claims to have written *Famous Women* as a favor to women; Christine writes *The Book of the City of Ladies* out of a desperate need to create both a space and a defense for herself and for other women within a culture that condemns them. The work is thus one of explicit community building, not just within the fictional City of Ladies but also beyond the text, functioning, as Anna Wilson says of fan fiction, as a "form of literary response where literary allusions evoke not only a shared intellectual community in the audience but also a shared affective community" (2016, ¶1.4).

[3.4] In framing his scholarship in *Famous Women*, Boccaccio relies on "learning where I can from trustworthy authors" (2001, 11), thus placing himself and his text firmly within the tradition of *auctoritas*, which is derived from "an affiliation with the past that renders individual authors virtually indistinct from one another" (Summit 2003, 92). Christine references such an authorial tradition in her own opening to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, comparing other (male) authors en masse to "a gushing fountain" (1992, 4) in a perhaps inadvertently phallic description of the weight of extant misogynistic scholarship, as well as a reference to her own familiarity with this canon, a trait that is both academic and fannish. A close reading of this preface will also note Christine's purposeful framing of herself within the narrative as a scholar, as she begins with a description of herself "sitting in my study surrounded by many books of different kinds, for this has long been my habit to engage in the pursuit of knowledge" (1999, 5). This also echoes Boccaccio's self-presentation throughout *On*



*the Fates of Famous Men* as writing in his study while being visited by ghosts who demand that he tell their stories. She later describes herself to the Ladies as a "simple and ignorant scholar" (1999, 15), using the term *estudiante*, the feminine form of *scholar*, rather than by what might seem the more obvious descriptor of woman, or indeed abjecting herself as Margery Kempe does by referring to herself as "this creature." In explaining her own text, even though she clearly was familiar with and reliant on earlier scholarship much as Boccaccio was, Christine instead frames her narrative as a powerfully affective dream-vision. She describes herself as having a "head bowed as in shame and my eyes full of tears" (1999, 7) by the gulf between her lived experience of womanhood and the contempt with which the male authors she trusted invariably discussed women, convinced "women are guilty of such horrors as so many men seem to say" (1999, 7). In her despair, she is visited by allegorical representations of Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice, "crowned and of majestic appearance" (1999, 7), who tell her and teach her of women's abilities and histories, positioning Christine's self-as-character in the role of purposefully obtuse student. Indeed, Christine claims that when these visitors appeared, she "threw herself fully face down in front of them, not just on to my knees...kissing the ground they stood on, I adored them" (1999, 15), an embodied action of humbling, one which it is difficult to imagine Boccaccio making. In *On the Fates of Famous Men*, when Boccaccio is visited by the "laureate poet" Petrarch under similar despairing circumstances, Petrarch merely scolds Boccaccio for his sloth—"vicious idilnesse" (1967, 184) in John Lydgate's 1430 English translation—and Boccaccio returns to writing, having "ouercam thymptent feeblesse / Of crokid age" (1967, 187–88). Petrarch thus functions as both teacher and authorial inspiration. In contrast, the textual framing device of adoration, and to an extent abjection, that Christine uses ties her into the tradition of medieval women's visionary literature, in which "the writer establishes her authority on the basis of her self-effacement" (Summit 2003, 95). While Christine's dream-vision and supernatural visitors would have been understood by readers as allegorical and not the literal, divine visitation present in visionary literature, Christine still rhetorically places herself as a channel for the work of these ladies in building the City in the way that echoes, for example, Hildegard of Bingen's description of herself as "a feather...not fly[ing] of its own accord; it is borne up by the air" (2001, 1009). Her authority thus derives not simply from her own scholarship but from her role as amanuensis for these three divine Ladies. However, when the Ladies reveal to her that she "alone of all women have been granted the honour of building the City of Ladies" (1999, 12), Christine replies, "Behold your handmaiden" (1999, 16)—a phrase that readers would have recognized as an echo of the Virgin Mary's words upon the Annunciation. This suggests that even when Christine rhetorically humbles herself, it is a careful and controlled action serving a larger purpose within the narrative.

[3.5] While heavily allegorical, *The Book of the City of Ladies* is also a deeply affective and personal text for Christine, beginning as it does with a vivid description of her emotional state and as it engages in a reclamation both of the specific historical women mentioned by the text and of women as a group, capable of the same virtue and worth as men. Although Christine doesn't explicitly invoke Boccaccio in this introductory section to the *City of Ladies*, both *On the Fates of Famous Men* and its sequel, *Famous Women*, were sufficiently well known that her readers would have known exactly what she was reworking.

---

## 4. No art she hadn't mastered

[4.1] Of special interest from a fan studies perspective is Christine's recontextualization of women who have appeared in earlier works as figures of infamy. Throughout *Famous Women*, Boccaccio does not refrain from criticizing women he has included if he thinks that they have overstepped the bounds of appropriate behavior, thus allowing his idea of fame to encompass both exemplars and cautionary tales. Christine solves this conundrum through a combination of selective gathering of examples and, within those examples, an emphatically reclamatory form of storytelling that allows even infamous women to enter the City of Ladies within certain parameters. In this way, she highlights both a scholarly and fannish "high level of knowledge of and insight into its [her] source texts" as well as a willingness to fill in the gaps, performing an "interlinear glossing of a source text" (Wilson 2016, ¶1.4).

[4.2] One sterling example of Christine's reclamation can be seen by comparing Boccaccio's treatment of the mythological character of Medea to Christine's. To Boccaccio, Medea is worthy of inclusion in his *Famous Women* for being "the cruelest example of ancient treachery" and "the cleverest of witches" (2001, 75). After describing the trail of corpses she leaves, occasionally literally, in her wake, Boccaccio finishes his account by using her as an example of the danger of sight and, through sight, of desire:

[4.3] Certainly, if powerful Medea had closed her eyes or turned them elsewhere when she first raised them longingly to Jason, her father's reign would have been of greater duration as would have been her brother's life, and her virginal honour would have remained unbroken. All these things were lost because of the shamelessness of her eyes. (2001, 79)

[4.4] Thus in Boccaccio's telling, had Medea not shamelessly lusted after Jason, her father's reign, her brother's life, and her virginity, apparently all of roughly equivalent value, would have been spared such wanton destruction. Having restored her aged father to the throne of Colchis at the conclusion of the narrative, thus restoring

appropriate, male dynastic power to the realm, Medea's own narrative ends abruptly with Boccaccio discarding any further concern for or interest in her: "I do not remember having read or heard what Medea did later, or where or how she died" (2001, 79). This stands in contrast to even classical Greek depictions of Medea, who, in Euripides' eponymous drama, is borne into the heavens in a celestial chariot after taking bloody revenge on Jason for betraying her.

[4.5] Christine includes Medea several times in her *City*, but as an exemplar rather than a cautionary tale. Medea first appears in part 1 as one of the examples given by Lady Reason of the heights of skill and knowledge to which a woman can rise if given the opportunity: "No art had been invented that she [Medea] hadn't mastered" (1999, 63). Here such ability is not proof of wickedness or witchcraft but merely an example of the skills that might be acquired by a highly intelligent individual of either gender who has been permitted to learn, not unlike Christine herself. Her Medea is not a clever witch but instead a skilled worker of marvels (1999, 63).

[4.6] Medea appears in a slightly longer entry in part 2 as one of Lady Rectitude's examples of a woman who is constant in her love, alongside other figures such as Dido. Again, the text immediately characterizes her as a princess "supremely learned" (1999, 174). Interestingly, while Christine describes Medea's love for Jason as "undying, [and] passionate," she also claims that Medea was "so struck by Jason's good looks, royal lineage, and impressive reputation that she thought he would make a good match for her," which frames Medea's falling in love with Jason almost as a rational, dynastically appropriate choice for the princess to have made (1999, 174) instead of the lustful, destructive desire condemned by Boccaccio ([1374] 2001, 79). It is not Medea's desiring eyes that drive her to choose Jason but a careful, reasonable process of decision making. Jason is the sole villain of Christine's telling, as he returns Medea's priceless knowledge, aid, and loyalty by breaking his oath to take "no other woman but her as his wife" (1999, 175). Instead of being a supremely violent and unprincipled committer of fratricide, in Christine's telling, it is Medea herself who would have "rather been torn limb from limb" than betray Jason's love. Her chastity, or lack thereof, is also never addressed in Christine's narrative. Christine's account thus ends focused on Medea's faithful suffering at the hands of the unfaithful Jason (1999, 175).

[4.7] While Christine has clearly made choices in her depiction of Medea meant to shape the reader's understanding of her, this does not place her telling in opposition to earlier tellings of Medea, since, as Ruth Morse points out in *The Medieval Medea*, "no morphology is neutral" (1996, 200). Boccaccio, himself far from a neutral chronicler, had already shaped his own retelling of Medea's story to focus blame on Medea and ignore, excuse, or otherwise deemphasize negative interpretations of

Jason. He deliberately chose to leave out some details, included by the classical authors he had drawn from, that addressed Jason's status as a breaker of oaths to Medea as well as his second marriage to Creusa, the princess of Corinth (1996, 200). The difference, thus, is not that Christine recontextualizes the story of Medea but that she does so in a way that valorizes Medea not just as a virtuous woman but also as a virtuous person. Christine's *Book of the City of Ladies* shows that the same texts and tools of analysis used by male authors to denigrate women can themselves be used to instead validate the characters of women, even those traditionally repudiated by earlier histories. Thus, in fannish parlance, Christine is writing a form of fix-it fic for Medea, where the tragedies and misfortunes visited on her are rooted not in her own sinful nature but in the actions of those around her.

[4.8] We can see a similar pattern at work in Christine's depiction of other famous women within the Greco-Roman tradition. Boccaccio, once again obsessed with issues of chastity, uses the mythical Carthaginian queen Dido as a way to shame women who remarry, exhorting them, "Let the women of today blush, then, as they contemplate Dido's lifeless body...let them bow their heads in sorrow that Christian women are surpassed in chastity by a woman who was a limb of Satan" (2001, 179). Boccaccio's Dido is clever, mentally strong, morally strong, an excellent ruler, and of distinguished lineage, but to him the importance of all of these virtues are only in their service to her "exceptional virtue and purity" (2001, 173). Wholly ignoring Virgil's episode in book 4 of *The Aeneid*, Boccaccio argues that Dido "had already decided to die rather than violate her chastity" before even meeting "the Trojan Aeneas (whom she never saw)" (2001, 175). Having opened his chapter with the "hope that my modest remarks may cleanse away (at least in part) the infamy undeservedly cast on the honour of her widowhood," Boccaccio has already positioned himself as a rewriter of Dido's story to emphasize just one portion of it. The moral value of chastity in widowhood is what women should learn from Boccaccio's Dido, and woe betide the woman who fails to live up to her example (2001, 167-79).

[4.9] Christine's Dido, in contrast, is an example to women because of her "great courage, nobility, and virtue, qualities which are indispensable to anyone who wishes to act prudently (1999, 82). Dido, who rules "gloriously over her city and had a peaceful and happy existence" (1999, 173) is, like Medea, ruined only because she has fallen in love with an unfaithful man. Again, in these examples Christine decouples the danger of love as an emotion from its force as a threat to chastity and instead focuses on her central thesis that virtues are not themselves gendered.

[4.10] The Princess Polyxena of Troy who inhabits the pages of *Famous Women* is "worthy of remembrance that her tender age, female sex, royal delicacy, and altered fortune could not overcome the sublime spirit of this girl" (2001, 133). Boccaccio's

Polyxena's strength of character is at odds with her femininity and is thus even more to be valorized by both Boccaccio and presumably the reader. The Polyxena who dwells within *The Book of the City of Ladies*, though, is described as "not only beautiful but also extremely steadfast and resolute" (1999, 188); her virtues are not divided along lines of gender but are all of a piece. As Lady Reason explains to Christine, "It is he or she who is the more virtuous who is the superior being: human superiority or inferiority is not determined by sexual difference but by the degree to which one has perfected one's nature and morals" (1999, 23).

---

## 5. Morally impeccable

[5.1] Christine does not content herself with including paragons of virtue already discussed by earlier male authors or in reclaiming women she thought had been falsely defamed by those selfsame authors. Her City of Ladies has room not just for saints, de-deified goddesses, and other characters of the distant or mythological past but also contains women from the recent historical record and, indeed, those who were Christine's contemporaries, such as the duchess of Orleans, "astute in her affairs, fair minded with everyone" (1999, 196), or the duchess of Burgundy, "well-disposed towards others, morally impeccable" (1999, 196). Christine's inclusion of these contemporary virtuous women bolsters her larger argument in several different ways and is also striking in that these women were on opposite sides of the French civil war that had raged through Christine's lifetime. By not confining her catalog of worthy women to the past and by presenting the City of Ladies as both contemporary and politically neutral, she again repudiates the scholars who have nothing good to say about the women around them. Boccaccio's *Famous Women* saves praise and efforts for women dwelling in the distant, pagan past, with only three exceptions: two women of Sicily from the 12th century and his own contemporary, Queen Giovanna of Naples, the subject of the book's final chapter. The latter he could hardly leave out, having chosen to dedicate *Famous Women* to a high-ranking lady in Giovanna's court. Christian women, in Boccaccio's telling, while "resplendent in the true and unflinching light" of their faith (2001, 13), cannot be given the same credit for their own accomplishments, since pagan women managed to accomplish their deeds without the "commands and example of their holy Teacher" (2001, 13) that benefited Jewish and Christian women.

[5.2] By giving readers examples of noblewomen whose reputations they would have been familiar with through the readers' own lived experiences, Christine also encourages the reader, whether a woman or a man, to consider their own lived experiences when judging the potential virtue of both women overall and of any individual woman. As she says in her preface, "I could find no evidence from my own experience to bear out such a negative view of female nature and habits" (1999, 6).

This argument from experience, validated by Lady Reason herself, would have been a powerful one for those in her audience, especially women, who were likely to be less familiar with the full canon of classical scholarship, as it firmly places their own lived experience as legitimate source of both authority and knowledge, an *auctoritas* that derives directly from both Nature and God and is thus capable of supplanting the false *auctoritas* of some earlier male authors. "Our aim is to help you get rid of those misconceptions which have clouded your mind and made you reject what you know and believe in fact to be the truth just because so many people have come out with the opposite opinion" (1999, 8). This framing also immediately contextualizes the value of the lessons and examples that Christine includes, continuing her argument, as seen in the case of Dido, that it is not the deeds of the women that matter but the virtues and values that such actions represent. Thus, as Morse argues, the significance of *The Book of the City of Ladies* is that it

[5.3] deploys allegory for a reinterpretation of history, and women's place in it; it assumes the authority to recontextualize and re-describe the gifts, talents, and deeds of women; in its ambitious intertextuality it appropriates and re-turns the examples of Boccaccio, adding copious "modern examples" to demonstrate women's contribution to the most public aspects of life. (1996, 231)

[5.4] Christine is reclaiming the exemplary tradition on behalf of women, who had previously only been allowed grudging inclusion, and even then usually as cautionary tales. She is thus, in fannish tradition, creating a space within the text in which she can see herself. It, like other fan works, becomes "affective hermeneutics," which "has a particular resonance for marginal communities whose histories must be read between the lines" (Wilson 2016, ¶4.8)

---

## 6. Conclusion

[6.1] What is added to the conversation by contextualizing de Pizan as a fan author or by considering the fannish modes of expression present in her works? The field of fan studies began as ethnographic studies of fan behaviors and activities, and it is often still heavily focused on contemporary fan practices or those dating back a few decades at most, to slightly prior to what is usually considered the birth of the field with the publication of Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* in 1992. It is often said that fandom itself has a short memory, but at present the same criticism could easily be offered of fan scholars (Coker 2016).

[6.2] This current lack of larger historicity risks making fan works seem like simply a by-product of contemporary media production, which, when combined with the still

extant stigma attached to the work of women, threatens to marginalize fan works by women as mere ethnographic practice rather than as valid literary productions. In much the same way, viewing medieval writing primarily through the lens of the medieval scholastic traditions of *auctoritas* threatens, by nature of its close affiliation with institutions that excluded women, to remove women writers from consideration as authors. Just as looking at the full scope of medieval women's writing "unearths a range of literate forms and practices that existed outside the schools and their models of *auctoritas*, but held cultural significance" (Summit 2003, 93), looking at fan works as part of larger literary histories opens up lines of dialogue between both these texts and the canonical texts with which they interplay.

[6.3] Medieval modalities of literary production are of special interest to fan studies scholars because of the ways in which certain earlier concepts of writing and authority map onto contemporary ways of thinking about fan works. Recognizing complicated networks of authorship that may include the patron opens up spaces to consider, for example, the role of contemporary fan exchanges, in which ideas for works are suggested by persons to whom the finished fan works will be gifted. Reconsideration of the role of the compiler, described by de Pizan in *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry* as "a lawful and praiseworthy matter when material is suitably applied wherein is the master of the material, for therein is the indication of having seen and read many books" (1999b, 144), may aid in conceptualizing the role of those who curate or compile information. This allows us to view fandom wikis or even curated lists with links to recommended works of fan fiction as "more than an act of textual subservience" (Summit 2003, 100). Medieval scholarship offers tools for understanding authorial anonymity "not as a lack of authorship but as a form of authorship with cultural value in its own right" (Summit 2003, 95). Summit's further discussion of the potential playfulness of a space of nongendered possibility created by such anonymity and coined "epicene writers" (95) deserves to be of intense interest to contemporary fan studies scholars, given both the common anonymity or pseudonymity of many fan works and, more importantly, their production by women, queer individuals, and those who do not identify as cisgender. Most important of all are the ways in which incorporating medieval and other premodern scholarship into fan studies gives us methodologies with which to discuss ideas of *auctoritas* that flow not from originality but from history, tradition, and an affiliation with the past. This decentralizes originality as the most important part of a text and breaks away from the stranglehold that authorial copyright has had on discussions, understandings, or indeed the very valuation of contemporary fan works, both within the academy and within the larger culture. If the field of fan studies begins with *Textual Poachers*, then it also begins with the implicit characterization of fan works as poaching, a term burdened with connotations of illicitness or even illegality. Methodologies present in medieval scholarship allow us a path away from that constricting framework.

[6.4] Locating contemporary fan works within extant modalities of literary histories is not intended to validate fan works because fan works are not works in need of validation. Nor is it meant, by the same token, to diminish the work of earlier women authors by tagging them as only or simply works of fan fiction. Instead, by reframing these earlier works of literature as part of a longer history of women's writing that also involves the work being done today within modalities of fan writing, and by the same token reconsidering fan works as "acts of women's literary activity in a continuum with historical practice and historical treatment" (Coker 2016), we, much as Christine herself did in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, create a theoretical space that historicizes, contextualizes, and indeed valorizes women writers of both fannish and nonfannish works.

[6.5] All of you who love virtue, glory, and a fine reputation can now be lodged in great splendour inside its wall, not just women of the past but also those of the present and the future, for this city has been founded and built to accommodate all deserving women. (de Pizan 1999a, 237).

---

## 7. Works cited

Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Renate, ed. 1997. *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*. Translated by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kevin Brownlee. New York: Norton.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. (1374) 2001. *Famous Women*. Translated by Virginia Brown. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brown-Grant, Rosalind. 1999. *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women: Reading beyond Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coker, Cait. 2016. "Problems of Literary History and Fandom." Paper presented at the Popular Culture Association/American Cultural Association Annual Conference, Seattle, WA, April 1-4.

de Pizan, Christine. 1992. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards. New York: Persea Books.

de Pizan, Christine. 1999a. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Translated by Rosalind Brown-Grant. London: Penguin Books.

de Pizan, Christine. 1999b. *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*. Translated by Sumner Willard. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse. 2014. "Introduction: Why a Fan Fiction Studies Reader Now?" In *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, edited by Karen Hellekson and



Kristina Busse, 1–17. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Hildegard of Bingen. 2001. *Selected Writings*. Translated by Mark Atherton. London: Penguin Classics.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Kempe, Margery. (1501) 2001. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Translated by Lynn Staley. New York: Norton Critical Editions.

Lydgate, John. 1967. *The Fall of Princes*. Edited by Henry Bergen. 4 vols. London: Early English Text Society.

Minkel, Elizabeth. 2016. "Harry Potter and the Sanctioned Follow-on Work." *Medium*, August 4. <https://medium.com/fansplaining/harry-potter-and-the-sanctioned-follow-on-work-or-fan-fiction-vs-the-patriarchy-d43753e0b8b#.z7khul9uz>.

Minnis, Alastair. 2010. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Morse, Ruth. 1996. *The Medieval Medea*. Suffolk: D. S. Brewer.

Romano, Aja. 2016. "Hamilton Is Fan Fic, and Its Historical Critics Are Totally Missing the Point." *Vox*, April 14. <http://www.vox.com/2016/4/14/11418672/hamilton-is-fan-fic-not-historically-inaccurate>.

Summit, Jennifer. 2003. "Women and Authorship." In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*, edited by Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, 91–108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, Ika. 2016. Editorial to "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0807>.

Wilson, Anna. 2015. "Immature Pleasures: Affective Reading in Margery Kempe, Petrarch, Chaucer, and Modern Fan Communities." PhD diss., University of Toronto.

Wilson, Anna. 2016. "The Role of Affect in Fan Fiction." In "The Classical Canon and/as Transformative Work," special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0684>.