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# Defender OF Women

*Christine de Pizan, Europe's first professional female writer, used her words to fight the misogyny of her time*

Written by Jessica Leggett

**C**hristine de Pizan was undoubtedly one of the most revolutionary writers in history. She broke the mould at a time when both society and literature were dominated by men, building a career that was unprecedented for women in the Middle Ages. In the words of writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, Pizan was the first woman to "take up her pen in defence of her sex".

Pizan was born in Venice in 1364. Her father was Thomas de Pizan, a councillor for the Republic of Venice and a physician, but unfortunately we don't know who her mother was, other than that she was an aristocratic woman. When she was four-years-old, Pizan and her family moved to Paris after her father was appointed the court astrologer to King Charles V - she would remain in France for the rest of her life.

We know that Pizan's father encouraged her to learn, giving his daughter the same education as her two younger brothers, a highly unusual decision for the time. In her most famous work, *The Book Of The City Of Ladies*, the character Lady Rectitude tells her, "Your father, who was a natural philosopher, was not of the opinion that women grow worse by becoming educated."

On the other hand, Pizan's mother believed her daughter should stick to the traditional, domestic education of women, as Lady Rectitude reminds her: "Your mother, however, who held the usual feminine ideas on the matter, wanted you to spend your time spinning... prevented you from making more progress and going deeper into science and learning in your childhood."

It is thought that with her father's position at court, Pizan would have had access to the king's royal library and therefore would have been able to read the extensive collection of books there. At the age of 15, she married Etienne du Castel, a court secretary. The couple had a happy marriage and they had three children together, with Pizan's duties as a mother taking her away from her studying.

Sadly, her world turned upside down when her father died in 1388 and the following year, Etienne succumbed to the plague after a decade together. Suddenly a young widow, it was up to Pizan to look after her three children (unfortunately, one of her two daughters died in childhood), her mother and niece.

Despite her education, Pizan was never taught how to deal with her husband's finances and so she found herself in an uphill battle, fighting lawsuits for over a decade in an attempt to get her rightful inheritance. Her experience would eventually inspire her to write *The Treasure Of The City Of Ladies* in 1405, a manual which included advice on various topics - such as managing a husband's affairs - for women of all social classes.

While it was normal and expected of young widows such as herself to remarry, Pizan refused to do so and instead sought refuge in her education and writing. She wrote poems lamenting the loss of her husband and her widowhood, and produced ballads about courtly love, a popular literary tradition of the time that focused on chivalry and illicit romantic relationships between ladies and knights.



In fact, Pizan wrote so many of them that she published her first book, *One Hundred Ballads*, in 1393. The book was received warmly at the French court and as a result she started receiving offers of financial patronage that enabled her to successfully earn a living from her writing. In one of her later works, *Le Livre De La Mutacion De Fortune*, Christine would comment "de femelle devins masle" - that she had transformed from a woman into a man in order to support her family.

Among her many patrons were King Henry IV of England; Louis I, Duke of Orléans; and Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy; who commissioned her to write a biography of his brother, King Charles V, who had died in 1380. Not only did she dedicate and present her works to those who supported her financially, but it is believed that Pizan also produced some of them in her own scriptorium in Paris. It's thought that she personally oversaw the creation of these beautifully illustrated manuscripts and she even features in some of the images.

Although her career had begun with tales of courtly love, it did not stay that way for long. In medieval society, women were subordinate to men, they had no legal independence (unless they

**ABOVE** Pizan was inspired to write about Joan of Arc after her victory at the Siege of Orléans

were widowed) and for the majority of them their responsibilities were confined to the domestic sphere. The belief that women were inherently weak and defective was reinforced by popular histories and texts written by learned authors. Pizan, disappointed and frustrated with the "many wicked insults about women and their behaviour", wanted to change this narrative.

In 1399, she released her *L'Épistre Au Dieu D'amours*, a defence of women against the prevalent misogyny in the widely popular 13th century allegorical poem *Roman De La Rose*. The poem, first written by Guillaume de Lorris and then continued by Jean de Meun, portrayed women as greedy, manipulative and lustful seducers. Arguing that the poem was deeply misogynistic and degrading, Christine expanded on her criticism with a direct attack on de Meun and his poem with her book, *The Tale Of The Rose*, which was published in 1402.

Two years later, she criticised *Les Lamentations De Matheolus* by Matheolus, a French cleric and poet. In his work, Matheolus complained about women and argued that marriage made men miserable. For Pizan, this was an example of the frequent attacks made on women and marriage in support of clerical celibacy. It was while reading Matheolus' *Lamentations* that Pizan became inspired to write her greatest and most famous piece of work, the aforementioned *City Of Ladies*.

In the *City Of Ladies*, Pizan serves as the narrator and discusses how she had been blinded by the learned authors whose misogyny had convinced her that women were indeed inferior: "I could hardly find a book on morals where, even before I had read it in its entirety, I did not find several chapters or certain sections attacking women, no matter who the author was... I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew. I was so transfixed in this line of thinking for such a long time that it seemed as if I were in a stupor."

As she wonders why women have yet to stand up to the accusations that are constantly levelled against them, Pizan is

**"This belief that women were inherently weak and defective was reinforced by popular histories and texts written by learned authors"**

## PIZAN'S PATRONS Six people who enabled Pizan's brilliant writing career

### John, Duke OF BERRY 1340-1416



John, a brother of King Charles V, received the first manuscript of *Le Livre Du Chemine De Long Estude*, a dream allegory with political and philosophical themes. She also dedicated her *L'Épistre De La Prison De Vie Humaine* to his daughter Marie, Duchess of Bourbon, whose husband had been captured by the English following the Battle of Agincourt.

### KING HENRY IV OF ENGLAND 1367-1413



Just like his predecessor King Richard II, Henry tried to persuade Pizan to move to England and become his court poet, a testament to her talent and reputation. Although she refused his offer, we know that she presented the king with an edition of *L'Épistre De Othéa A Hector*, one of her most popular works, in 1404.

### Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France c.1370-1435



Queen Isabeau is arguably Pizan's most famous patron. With Isabeau acting as regent and Pizan becoming a professional author, these two women held unprecedented positions in medieval France. In 1414, Christine produced *The Book Of The Queen*, her largest manuscript containing a collection of her work, which she dedicated and presented to Isabeau.

image source: wikipedia.org

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**ABOVE** Pizan presenting her book to Queen Isabeau, c.1410-1414

joined by three women of virtue - Reason, Rectitude and Justice - who tell her that it's her destiny to challenge this misogynistic treatment of women. With their help, she builds a symbolic city filled with remarkable women from history and recounts their stories, including Sappho; Medea; Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra; Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary.

Altogether, Pizan includes 165 women in her city who made important contributions to society and are celebrated for being respectable, honourable, faithful and chaste. She uses their stories to dispute the claims made by male authors that women are evil and unfaithful creatures, arguing that "many foolish men have claimed this because it displeased them that women knew more

than they did". She also takes the opportunity to advocate for girls to receive the same education as boys, stating, "If it were customary to send little girls to school like boys... they would learn as thoroughly the subtleties of all the arts and sciences."

While de Meun's *Roman De La Rose* criticised and denounced women, Pizan's city was a metaphor for feminine virtue and in her words "a refuge and defence against the various assailants, those ladies who have been abandoned for so long, exposed like a field without a surrounding hedge". With the *City Of Ladies*, she had given women the place in history that they deserved and highlighted the fact that women, including herself, had internalised the prejudice of men.

## John the Fearless 1371-1419



John gave Pizan several payments for her books and he notably paid her to finish the biography of his uncle, King Charles V, which his father Philip the Bold had commissioned before his death. Pizan also dedicated *The Treasure Of The City Of Ladies* to John's daughter, Margaret, Dauphine of France.

## Louis I, Duke of Orléans 1372-1407



The son of King Charles V and brother of King Charles VI, Louis was one of the members of the French court who took an interest in Pizan's early romantic ballads. She dedicated the first edition of her *L'Épître De Othéa A Hector* to Louis and he supported her literary career right up until his murder in 1407.

## Thomas Montagu, 4th Earl of Salisbury 1388-1428



Both the earl and his father, John Montagu, were supporters of Pizan and her work. It is known that he offered her a different form of patronage by taking her young son, Jean, to England and giving him a place in his household. King Henry IV would later move Jean to his own household in an attempt to persuade Pizan to move to England.



Pizan's city was also inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio and his book *On Famous Women*, published in 1374, in which he included the biographies of over 100 illustrious women in history. However, he only praised the women who had lived chaste and obedient lives while criticising those who had public roles, for example as warriors or rulers, and Pizan set out to correct this with her own revised biographies.

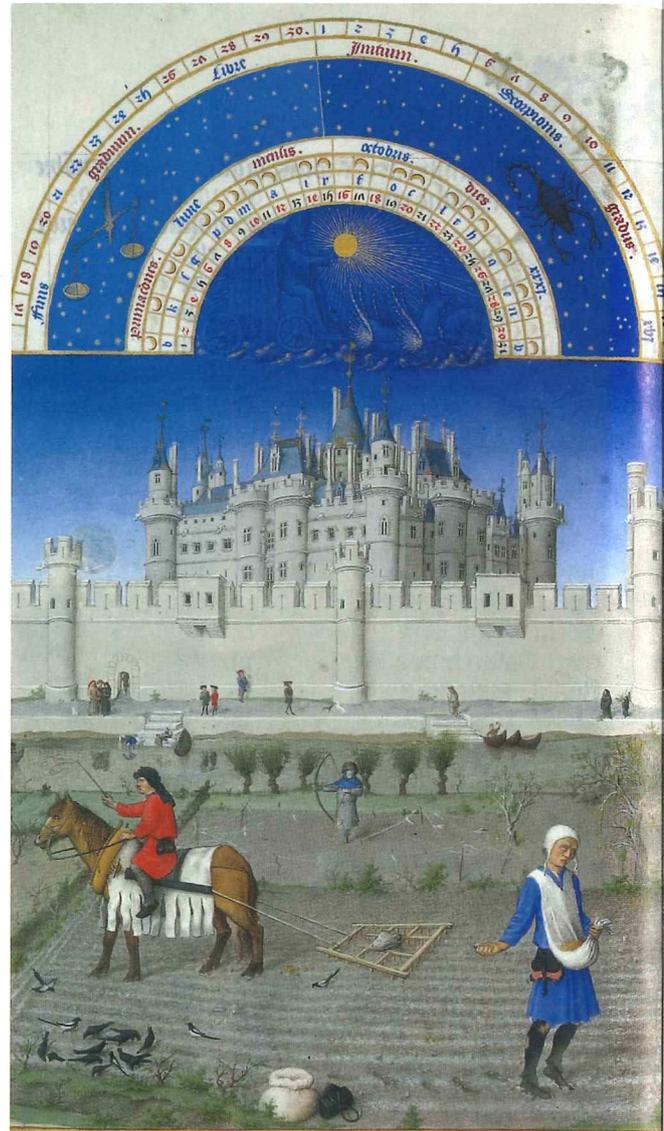
Interestingly, Salic Law was introduced in France during the 14th century, which prevented women or anyone born from the female line from inheriting the throne. However, France has a long history of women stepping in to govern the country during the absence or minority of the king. This included Queen Blanche, who acted as regent twice on behalf of her son King Louis IX in the 13th century, and whom Christine declared governed

**“Pizan firmly believed that women were equal to men and they should be treated as such”**

France “so nobly and so prudently that it was never better ruled by any man”.

Pizan's defence of female rulers was even more timely considering that when the *City Of Ladies* was published, Queen Isabeau was acting as regent of France on behalf of her husband, King Charles VI, who suffered with bouts of instability. While the queen found herself caught up in the hostility and power struggles that emerged in the absence of her husband, Pizan supported her and her role as a female regent, including her as one of the 165 women in the *City Of Ladies*.

Pizan's works triggered the 'querelle de femmes', also known as the woman question, an intellectual debate on the nature of women that would carry on into the 18th century. Arguably the starting point for early feminist thinking, the querelle de femmes debated what role women were to play in a society that was inherently patriarchal.



**RIGHT**  
The Louvre Palace during the reign of King Charles V

**MIDDLE-RIGHT**  
Christine offering a book to one of her patrons, Louis I, Duke of Orléans

**FAR-RIGHT** An illumination from the *City Of Ladies* depicting Christine with Rectitude, Reason and Justice

**OPPOSITE**  
Jean Gerson supported Pizan's criticism of the *Roman De La Rose*

## Palace Politics

Pizan's work was not restricted to the defence of women

During her lifetime, France was engulfed in social and political turmoil which greatly influenced her writing. The country was already in the midst of the Hundred Years' War against the English when King Charles VI's bouts of instability caused a power vacuum at court between the royal houses of Orléans and Burgundy, led by the king's brother Louis I, Duke of Orléans and his cousin, John the Fearless, respectively. In 1407, Louis was assassinated on John's orders, triggering a civil war that lasted almost three decades.

In response to all of this, Pizan wrote numerous works discussing the various issues in France, starting with one of her major political treatises, *The Book Of The Body Politic*. Published in 1407 and dedicated to the king's heir, Dauphin Louis, the treatise discussed social responsibility and education for all classes, from princes to the common people, and served as an instruction manual for the young ruler.

In 1410, Pizan was commissioned by an unknown patron to write *The Book Of Feats Of Arms And Of Chivalry* - essentially a book on the art of war. Describing how kings and princes should conduct war both on and off the battlefield, she argued that there are "many great wrongs in warfare" but also that "wars undertaken for a just cause are permitted by God". The manual was later translated and published in England by William Caxton for King Henry VII in 1489.

Pizan followed this with her last major work, *The Book Of Peace*, which was also dedicated to Dauphin Louis and was published in 1413. At a time when corruption and civil unrest was rife in France, she urged him to seek peace for the country, believing that he was capable of becoming a just ruler who could bring an end to the constant fighting. But, sadly, he died just two years later.

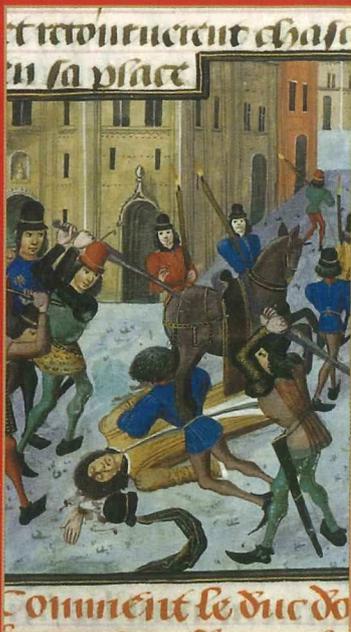


Image source: [www.bibliothèque.nationale.de/france](http://www.bibliothèque.nationale.de/france)





The querelle began after Christine published her first criticism of *Roman De La Rose*, sparking a controversy among French intellectuals about the vilification of women in literary texts. She ended up exchanging letters with two French royal secretaries who opposed her arguments, Jean de Montreuil and Gontier Col, but she also received support, namely from Jean Gerson, the chancellor of the University of Paris.

Through her writing, Pizan opened up an opportunity for women to oppose the deep-set misogynistic views of the patriarchal society in which they lived. For the first time, a woman was speaking up for fellow women, instead of their merits and faults being discussed solely between men. She firmly believed that women were equal to men and they should be treated as such, and as a result she has often been identified as a feminist who championed women in medieval society.

Having said this, labelling Pizan as a feminist is not a straightforward matter. To start with, the word 'feminist' did not exist in her lifetime and to label her as one is anachronistic. Instead, she would most likely have seen herself as a defender or advocate for women. On top of this, we have to think about the world in which Pizan lived and not ours - we should not be holding her up as a hero of modern feminism.

It is because of this that Pizan has often been criticised today for not questioning society in the way that we would expect modern feminists to do. After all, she never argued against the division of roles based on gender, she did not advocate for social, political or economic equality for women, and she did not appear to encourage them to aim for the independence that she had managed to gain for herself.

However, we have to remember that Pizan was restricted in terms of what she could confront if she wanted her arguments to be accepted, considering what was legally and 'morally' right in France during this period. Nevertheless, there is no denying that she argued in favour of women and made some huge accomplishments, setting a precedent to be followed - and perhaps making her a proto-feminist.

For around the last decade of her life, Pizan retired to the abbey at Poissy on the outskirts of Paris, where her surviving daughter had become a nun. Her writing ground to a halt until 1429, when she wrote her last poem, *The Tale Of Joan Of Arc*, a patriotic verse that celebrated Joan at the very height of her popularity. Proclaiming that "the sun began to shine again" thanks to Joan, Pizan is believed to have died in 1430 and so she did not live to see Joan's execution the following year.

After her death, Pizan's works remained popular and they were even translated into other languages such as English and Portuguese. Her work would continue to influence later writers until the late-16th century, when they fell out of print and were largely unknown and forgotten for the following three centuries. Although her writings reemerged in the late 19th century, *The Book Of The City Of Ladies* was not translated into modern English until 1982.

During her extraordinary lifetime, Pizan achieved her own independence and wrote over 40 texts, an exceptional feat for a woman of the time. Using her voice, she defended the intellectual and moral character of women and, although it would be centuries before women achieved equality, she most certainly paved the way for them. ○

