Christine de Pizan: A Voice for the Silenced Widow and Her Situation in the Fifteenth Century

I am a widow lone, in black arrayed,  
With sorrowful countenance, simply clad.  
In great distress and with an air so sad  
I bear this sorrow now upon me laid.¹

This excerpt from Christine de Pizan’s “Rondeau III” appropriately represents the sentiments of a woman entering a new stage in her life, that of widowhood. The troubles widows encounter, whether societal, political, occupational or familial, after the death of their husband materialize throughout the centuries. Such problems are apparent prior to the Late Middle Ages, during the Late Middle Ages, the time in which Christine de Pizan writes her famous literary works, and in the succeeding centuries as well. Christine, writing in the late fourteenth century and early fifteenth century, becomes an advocate for widows and women in general. A widow herself, Christine utilizes her experiential knowledge and her advanced writing capabilities to be the voice for the silenced sex, challenging misogynistic and patriarchal ideologies that were harbored throughout the Middle Ages. Christine emphasizes female education in her works as a means of cultivating the female mind but more importantly as a means of preparing women for the aftermath of their husband’s death. By examining the life of Christine de Pizan in regards to her literary works her advocacy for the betterment of widows’ situations in the Late Middle Ages, notably her emphasis on female education, will be discussed.

To understand the advocacy of widowhood and education in Pizan’s writings, sections of her biography must be explored, as experience is essential to her literary style. Roberta Krueger argues “each time Christine tells a part of her story through a different body of materials… she adds new perspectives to a self-narrative that grows, in the manner of a crystal, around a core of experience”.\(^2\) Christine’s own marriage in 1380 and subsequent widowhood is the core to her works advocating widow’s rights. At the age of fifteen, a conventionally marriageable age for aristocrats,\(^3\) Christine married Étienne de Castel, a young French court notary.\(^4\) This young marriage unfortunately led to early widowhood. At the age of twenty-five, after only ten years of marriage, Christine was widowed when Étienne unexpectedly died of an infection. Susan Groag Bell describes how “his widow never completely recovered from the shock or from the aftermath of loneliness and the misery of being plunged unprotected into a hostile world”.\(^5\) The grief Christine felt inspires her early poetic works such as the previously mentioned “Rondeau III”, “Seulette Suy et Seulette Vueil Estre”, and “Like The Mourning Dove”. All three poems or, more appropriately titled, ballads express Christine’s loneliness as a result of her widowhood.

The ballad “Seulette Suy et Seulette Vueil Estre” gives insight into Christine de Pizan’s attitude towards her own husband and, more generally, fifteenth century spousal roles and relations. Christine laments:

---


\(^3\) Susan Groag Bell, \textit{The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan’s Renaissance Legacy} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 13.


\(^5\) Bell, \textit{The Lost Tapestries}, 14.
Alone am I, alone I wish to be
Alone my gentle love has left me,
Alone am I, without friend or master,
Alone am I, in sorrow and in anger,
Alone am I, ill at ease, in languor,
Alone am I, more lost than anyone,
Alone am I, left without a lover.⁶

Christine characterizes her late husband as her “friend”, her “master” and her “lover”.
The idea of friendship and love in fifteenth century marriage is not uncommon, but it is also not a necessary feature. Bell argues Christine’s “father showed unusual qualities, for it appears that Christine was allowed to marry for love, rather than being obliged, as was customary at the time, to take a husband for reasons of family interest”.⁷ The poignancy of her loss and grief are evident in Christine’s poetic works, displaying her true love and devotion for her friend, her husband.

The label “master” is especially important when analyzing Christine’s advocacy for widows. The title of “master” for the husband is deeply manifested within medieval ideologies regarding marriage. Georges Duby argues, “It is a fact that in this society women never emerged from the strictest subordination. As Bishop Gilbert of Limerick put it so well, they submitted to their husbands whom they “served””.⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, in her “Introduction” to one of Duby’s works, asserts the idea of hierarchy was the very heart of “the traditional Christian marriage system… the husband has authority over

---

⁷ Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 13.
the sexuality and property of his obedient wife”. The idea of wife as “server” or object to her husband establishes specific roles for each spouse. The wife deals with domestic issues while consistently under the authority of the head of the house, her husband and father to her children. With usage of “master”, Christine de Pizan understands the hierarchical gender roles of her society. Bell argues “she became aware how necessary it was for women to be conversant with the domestic skills championed by her mother, and she often emphasized that women’s domestic work was not be denigrated”. Christine saw the necessity of the domestic duties of the female and the duties assigned to the male as head of the household.

The medieval ideology of spousal hierarchy complicates the situations of widows. Wives are forced to rely upon the authority of their husband. Upon the husband’s death, societal norms of the fifteenth century place the wellbeing of the widow and her children in the care of the widow’s father, her brother or her son. If the widow’s father or brothers are absent or deceased and the son is still in his youth, the widow is without the male authority she is accustomed to. This is the circumstance Christine de Pizan found herself in after Étienne’s death. Christine had experienced the death of her father, Tommaso, prior to the death of her husband. When Tommaso passed away in 1385 “the burden of support for his entire ménage fell to Étienne de Castel”.

As a result of both losses, Christine

---

10 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 9-10.
11 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 13.
12 Duby, Medieval Marriage, 6.
13 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 14.
was left to care for her widowed, “invalid” mother, a niece and her three young children. Though Christine did have living brothers, Paolo and Aghinolfo, they were notably absent. Edith Yenal’s biography of Christine explains they “returned to their native Italy to claim a family inheritance”. It was therefore necessary for Christine, previously accustomed to living under the authority of a male, to pick up the burden left by her father, brothers and husband. Christine became the head of the house, a role conventionally left for a man in the High Middles Ages. The accumulation of these events led to what Christine de Pizan describes as her transformation “from a woman to a male”.

Pizan describes this metaphorical gender change in her Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune, written between 1400 and 1403. Judith L. Kellogg describes the Mutacion de Fortune as “a universal history describing events that are memorable or influential because of unexpected turns of circumstances”. Christine begins the book with her own influential unexpected turn of circumstance. Christine’s expressed intimacy establishes “her firsthand familiarity with the subject of change”. Christine addresses issues of change and medieval society’s gender roles in the Mutacion de Fortune first by opening with an autobiographical poetic narrative in which she declares “I wish to tell my history/’Twill seem to some pure mystery”. Rather than stating the theme immediately

14 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 15.
15 Yenal, Christine de Pizan, xvi.
18 Kellogg, “Transforming Ovid”, 185.
or why her history relates to the title *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, Christine de Pizan continues the mystery of her history.

But even though they won’t believe,
I’ll tell the truth and won’t deceive.
It all happened to me, really;
I was twenty-five, or nearly,
It was no dream when it occurred,
No need to evoke the absurd.²⁰

The reader is informed of a significant event which occurred when the author was twenty-five. By examining Christine’s biography, reviewing her early poetry and analyzing the rest of this specific poem, one deduces this event to be the death of her husband and ensuing widowhood. Christine eventually states how she “a woman, became a man by a flick of Fortune’s hand”²¹, a result of her husband’s death. Christine addresses the absurdity of her claim, continuing:

It’s the truth and nothing more –
It seems I’ll have to re-create
Just how I did transmute
From a woman to a male:
I think the title of my tale
Is, if I’m not being importune,
“The Mutation of Fortune.”²²

By a twist of fate, a bad mutation of fortune, Christine de Pizan was left without a husband. She was also left without a male kin to help her in widowhood. Roberta Krueger comments that “to live in history as a woman is to be subject to vicissitudes and

---

²⁰ De Pizan, “Mutation of Fortune,” lines 3-8.
²¹ De Pizan, “Mutation of Fortune,” line 19.
change; gender roles may shift according to the “mutations” of fortune… Christine recounts her own submission to a reluctantly assumed male role in the Mutacion”. 23

What made matters worse for Christine, after metaphorically transforming into a male and assuming the head of household role, was the lack of financial support and education left by her father and husband. Her father, who died in poverty, left little financial provisions for his family. 24 Upon Étienne’s death, Christine was left a small amount of money from his estate. 25 This small inheritance caused great trouble for Christine, as she spent nearly fourteen years in litigation proceedings, 26 desperately fighting for what was rightfully left for her children and herself. Bell explains “her debtors had no qualms about lying, and they distorted the truth to such an extent that instead of inheriting the estates that were her due, Christine was forced to sell some of her prized possessions in order to pay legal costs”. 27 These court proceedings remained in Christine’s mind as she continued to produce literary works.

As a widow, Christine was forced to become a man and care for her family. However, as a woman, she was unable to properly do so. Bell explains, “As a women defending her own case, she became the butt of jokes among lawyers and clerks”. 28 This dilemma inspires Christine’s later advocacy for proper education to prepare women for widowhood. Charity Cannon Willard explains in Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works “Christine felt considerable bitterness at the custom that denied women adequate

23 Krueger, “Christine’s Anxious Lessons,” 24-25.
24 Yenal, Christine de Pizan, xvii.
25 Yenal, Christine de Pizan, xvii.
26 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 15.
27 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 15.
28 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 15.
information concerning their husband’s financial affairs, and as she was not even with her husband when he died, she had no real idea of his financial situation”. Christine’s bitterness and subsequent advocacy for widows, notably apparent with her emphasis on female education, is expressed within *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or, The Book of Three Virtues*, published in 1405. However, before analyzing Christine’s advocacy, her self-described mutation into a man must be examined further.

While fighting in the courts, Christine still had to manage her household and family. In the Middle Ages, the responsibility of family business was often left to the widow in the case of a husband’s death. A primary responsibility and concern of medieval parents was future security for their children, especially in regards to their matrimonial arrangements. The head of the household, the male, most often organized these arrangements. Georges Duby explains “any decision concerning the family’s marriages belonged to those who were responsible for the destiny of the patrimony, to the males of the lineage; above all, to the man who acted as their head”. Jacques Beauroy’s analysis of fourteenth century wills explains the familial situation upon the death of the head of the household. He reveals, “The conditions of the custody of their children was a major preoccupation of the will-makers. The surviving wife, mother of the children, or close relatives generally took on this burden.” As a widow, Christine had to take on the

---

responsibility conventionally left for the man of the house, supervising their children’s future, therefore enacting her transformation “from a woman to a male”.  

Acting now as a man, metaphorically speaking, Christine de Pizan successfully cared for the future of her children. Christine’s daughter, the eldest, was placed into the Royal Priory of Saint-Louis of Poissy, a Dominican convent, in 1398. Bell contends, “The peaceful tenor of convent life would protect the young girl from the turbulence of a world that had not been altogether kind to her mother”. It could be argued that Christine, experiencing the difficulties of fifteenth century widowhood first hand, wished to save her daughter from these same difficulties by never allowing her the opportunity to become a widow. Christine also tended to the future of Jean, her son, by her friendship with the earl of Salisbury. The earl, in 1397, decided to bring the thirteen-year old to England with him and educate Jean alongside the earl’s own son, who was close in age. Christine found a literal male authority figure, not a figurative male figure as she describes herself, for her son.

As stated, Christine de Pizan figuratively became a man after her husband’s death by literally doing the work of the medieval family man. This gender reversal inspires Christine’s later writings regarding women and widowhood. Judith L. Kellogg discusses the paradox Christine’s Mutation of Fortune presents in regards to her later literary works. “To assert a feminine authorial identity, she must be transformed into a male. By armoring herself with the cover of patriarchal discursive privilege, she can explore the

35 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 17.
36 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 19.
37 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 16.
relationship between her personal and cultural construction as a woman”.\textsuperscript{38} As a woman forced to act as a man in a patriarchal society, issues of gender roles in fifteenth century society became more apparent to Christine de Pizan. As a result, Christine addresses these presupposed gender notions. She becomes a voice for the unheard women, especially the silenced widow, and proposes female education. Krueger explains, “The tension between male and female identities and modes of learning is acute in the \textit{Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune}”.\textsuperscript{39} Christine’s initial ideas regarding female education begin in \textit{Mutation de Fortune}. These ideas are a precursor to similar ideas Christine proposes in her literary work \textit{The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or, The Book of Three Virtues}.

In the section “Advice for Noblewomen” in \textit{The Book of Three Virtues}, Christine stresses the importance of wife’s knowledge of her husband’s estate and business affairs. Stated previously, Christine was largely uneducated in her husband’s affairs. She was not properly prepared to deal with the aftermath of her husband’s death, which included settling financial situations and fighting for her inheritance. Christine’s own experience evidently influenced her advocacy for female education. She explains, “Women spend much of their lives in household without husbands… the ladies will have responsibilities for managing their property, their revenues, and their lands”.\textsuperscript{40} This was clearly the case for Christine. She goes on to explain, “In order for such a woman to act with good judgment, she must know the early income from her estate. She must manage it so well that by conferring with her husband, her gentle words and good counsel will lead to their

\textsuperscript{38} Kellogg, “Transforming Ovid”, 188.
\textsuperscript{39} Krueger, “Christine’s Anxious Lessons,” 23.
agreement to follow a plan for the estate”. Christine emphasizes the consultation of husband and wife regarding estate affairs. When living, the husband should be educating his wife on business affairs so she can properly manage in case of his absence, either from travelling or death.

Bell reflects how Christine “deplored the failure of many husbands who, because they do not entrust wives with knowledge of their business affairs, can leave unhappy widows at the mercy of their debtors”. This is apparent when Christine states, “the world is full of governor’s of lord’s lands and jurisdictions who are intentionally dishonest. Aware of this, a lady must be knowledgeable enough to protect her interests so that she cannot be deceived”. The unwelcome widowhood Christine experienced, complete with deception by men in court, inspired her to call for female education. She challenges the notion that women are inferior and unfit for education, a common ideology in the Middle Ages. Roberta Krueger astutely argues “by defending women against the charges of moral and intellectual deficiency levied by medieval misogynists, Christine clears the way for women’s education which remained a contested domain in 1400, even as opportunities for female instruction increased. Christine knows first hand that the many hardships widows face in the fifteenth century can be lessened if their husbands educate them properly. Because widows must metaphorically mutate from the female to male form in order to handle the affairs, proper education of the male head of household’s affairs is necessary.

41 De Pizan, “Advice,” 164.
42 Bell, The Lost Tapestries, 15.
43 De Pizan, “Advice,” 164.
By applying her experiential knowledge of widowhood, Christine was able to address the troubles that follow the death of a husband. With widowhood comes loss, grief, the metaphorical transformation into the male form by the literal transformation into the head of the household and an unknowledgeable wife about her deceased husband’s affairs. By examining Christine’s biography, poetry and prose, it is apparent Christine experienced these characteristic elements of fifteenth century widowhood. By dealing with her loss and her transformation in her literary works, Christine finds a small solution to the problem widows face. Her advocacy for female education not only will help shape the female mind, but will also prepare women for the aftermath of their husband’s death. By having their husband educate them on his business and financial affairs, the burdens of widowhood will be lessened for their wives. As a result of this proposition, Christine becomes a voice for the silenced and troubled women in her society, the widows.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


