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Elisa B. Filippone

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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The Feminization of the Literary Voice and the Rhetorical Tradition in *The Lais of Marie de France*, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and *The Book of the City of Ladies*

By

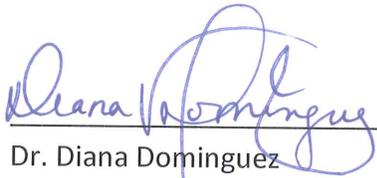
B. Elisa Filippone

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Liberal Arts in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

Master of Arts

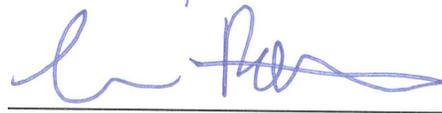
In English

Approved by:



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Dr. Diana Dominguez  
Thesis Director



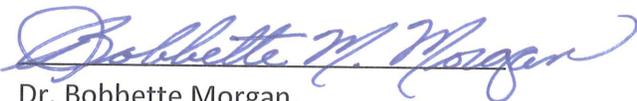
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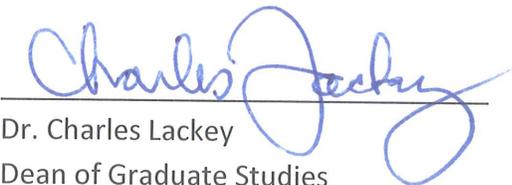
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University of Texas at Brownsville  
May 2014

The Feminization of the Literary Voice and the Rhetorical Tradition in *The Lais of Marie de France*, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, and *The Book of the City of Ladies*

A Thesis presented to the

Graduate Faculty of the

English Department at the University of Texas in Brownsville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for a Master's Degree in English

By

B. Elisa Filippone

May 2, 2014

For Esteban, Juan Pablo, Emilia, and Berta Elisa.

## Acknowledgments

This thesis was born from my desire to read more and look for the feminine voice—even the one attributed to women by men. True to the motivation that originated this three-year project—simply wanting to learn—I have found more satisfaction in the search than in the accomplishment. The preparatory research for this thesis was extensive, and the topic took form as I discovered texts and the authors’ stories. I am fortunate to have a strong committee: Dr. Diana Dominguez, an authority in Medieval literature, and Dr. James Frost and Dr. Lyon Rathbun, among some of the most capable experts and educators in Rhetorical Theory. In addition, Dr. Bobbette Morgan, a champion of education, served as the Graduate Faculty Representative given that my thesis proposes an option for further study in this discipline.

When I came to the university with a twenty-two year-old degree in business from UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico), having been out of the work force for a little less than that, and the simple but genuine ambition to learn, Dr. Dominguez believed in the essence of my drive. She guided me through the process of admissions and recommended me to Dr. James Frost to work as a graduate assistant when I expressed my intention of having an unabridged educational experience. Dr. Frost gave me the opportunity to learn beyond the classroom by placing me under the supervision of Dr. John Foreman, Dr. Therese Gallegos, and Ms. Ela Newman, who showed me their solid commitment to education, their irreproachable work ethic, and their passion for English.

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### Abstract

This study demonstrates how *The Lais of Marie de France* (12<sup>th</sup> c.) by Marie de France, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (14<sup>th</sup> c.) by Marguerite Porete, and Christine de Pizan's *The Book of City of Ladies* (15<sup>th</sup> c.) serve as the three progressive steps in the transformation of the rhetorical theory and the feminine literary voice, redefining woman from the idea of inferior entity written by men over centuries into the concept of an intellectual and virtuous female human being.

The development of a strong feminine literary voice starts as de France feminizes the masculine language she borrows from masculine oral tradition to write narrative poetry, enriched with a feminine perspective. A century later, Porete assumes solely feminine language—through the voice of a female soul that she makes available to the male soul—in a theological treatise that annuls the role of the Church to attain spiritual purity during this life. Subsequently, Pizan, in the fifteenth century, writes the first directly-stated defense for womankind, applying feminist literary criticism to important paternalistic texts, assuming an exclusively feminine voice, and providing a reinterpretation of history and mythology.

The first chapter of this thesis discusses the historical development of the concept of woman written by men, including a brief account of Sappho's literary merit as the last of a group of women who produced literature before the fifth century B.C.E. The next three chapters are dedicated to each of the three texts, and the final chapter explains the link between the texts, the relevance of knowing and remembering the talent and effort necessary to redefine woman in a literary world still dominated by men, and proposes options for further study in literature, psychology of education, and literary historiography.

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## PREFACE

### Introduction

In the Middle Ages, after centuries of efforts by men to forge a negative written definition of the female gender, women themselves began redefining the idea of woman. *The Lais of Marie de France* by Marie de France (12<sup>th</sup> c.), *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete (14<sup>th</sup> c.), and *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan (15<sup>th</sup> c.) were defining steps meant to re-conceptualize the idea of woman as an intelligent and moral being. These women participated in a progressive effort to create a feminine literary voice and add it to the literature written by men within the paternalistic social structure of the time.

### The Argument

The focus of this study is to trace the transformation of the rhetorical tradition and the feminine voice in these three texts. The analysis addresses the selection of genre and the way in which the text adds to the genre, the use and characteristics of the language, the style and its effectiveness, and the rhetorical tradition as it developed through time in each text.

In the first text, *The Lais of Marie de France*, the author feminizes the masculine language she borrowed from the Bretons, writing narrative poetry based on their chivalric stories, which were disseminated orally. Before two centuries had passed, Marguerite Porete wrote *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a theological treatise written entirely in feminine language, making the voice of her soul available to both male and female souls and contradicting the fundamental elements of Christian dogma of her day. And a little more than a century later, Christine de Pizan produced the first directly-stated defense of womankind, using Socratic irony

## PREFACE

to submit paternalistic literature to a feminist approach, and compiling a catalog of women's achievements, in history and mythology.

### Methodology

The analysis demonstrates how the characteristics of these texts make each of them building blocks in the definition of women by women and how they serve as the foundation for a conceptualization that continues to naturally evolve. This study reveals that the circumstances of disadvantage compelled these authors to challenge the idea that women could not and should not write, while trying to avoid censure and sanction. Female writers had to overcome the hurdle of operating under the label of inferior before aspiring to master the craft of writer in order to penetrate with brainpower the domain of male authors, finding—on the march—a literary voice of their own.

The authors and their texts are presented in chronological order in the thesis, but within each chapter, the analyses of the texts are organized by individual lai, in the case of Marie de France, and by specific topic contained within their texts for the other two authors. A selection of five lais representative of themes, length, and complexity are presented in sequential order in Chapter Two; the study of *The Mirror*, in Chapter Three, offers a discussion of topics that challenge Christian dogma; and in Chapter Four, *City of Ladies* challenges important literature from male authors that offends women's morality and intellectual abilities. These three chapters—Two, Three, and Four—include a discussion of the particular historical moment, the literary context at the creation and distribution of the text, and its place and influence on social, political, and religious matters.

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### **Selection of the Texts**

Marie de France, Marguerite Porete, and Christine de Pizan wrote—and publicly circulated—their works at a time when women were legally, socially, religiously, and “scientifically” considered inferior to men. Not only were women considered intellectually incapable of the kind of skills and craft that writing entailed, but it was also thought to be an affront to God’s law. These three women—and others whom historiographers continue to uncover and rediscover—risked both social and spiritual censure.

The texts were chosen for this study because they represent a progression of women’s writing that joined literary genres dominated by male writers: *The Lais* explore the genre of romance, traditionally a world of male privilege in which women are accessories and objects of conquest, from a feminine perspective that seems to uphold the status quo at the same time that it is subverted and upended; *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is the study of the most complex topic, and the most unattainable subject to women, a theological treatise on how to reach Grace that annuls the role of the Church with Porete’s claim of a direct and uncorrupted access to God; and *The Book of the City of Ladies* is the first feminist literary criticism of paternalistic texts that builds a city to house only virtuous women, excluding men. As such, these texts serve as apt examples for how women managed to infiltrate the literary world dominated by men through a variety of genres, styles, language, and rhetorical devices, tools thought to be too sophisticated and out of reach for women to understand and master.

### **Literature Review**

The historical research portion of the study includes a review of The Bible and works by Sappho, Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Ovid, Augustine, Aquinas, Ernest Crawley, the two-volume

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anthology *A History of Women* edited by George Duby and Michelle Perrot, and the five volume series *A History of Private Life* edited by Philippe Aries and George Duby. Each of these sources provide useful general historical context for the study of the texts themselves.

In addition, books by Alcuin Blamires, Vern Bullough, Nancy Folbre, Frances and Joseph Gies, Milo Kearney and Ken Hogan, John Stuart Mill, Kate Millett, and Eileen Power provide socio-historical context on more specific elements that pertain to the social environment of the authors and their texts. Articles by Vern L. Bullough, Paul J. Cornish, Betty Radice, John M. Riddle and J. Worth Estes, and Jean Scammell offer further socio-political information.

The rhetorical analysis includes a review of works by Kenneth Burke, George A. Kennedy, and Gilbert Highet's analysis of French literature in the Middle Ages, including Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer. In addition, two anthologies of rhetoricians give perspective of the place of women's writings within the male dominated world of literature throughout time: one compilation by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg includes writings of men and women, and the collection by Jane Donawerth gathers only women's works.

The analysis of the three texts was done using translations into English as well as other works originally written in other languages—such as Latin, Greek, and German. The translation of *The Lais of Marie de France* is by Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante. A comparative review of works in the same genre, style, and theme that served as models and inspiration includes the prose version by David Staines of *The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*, the verse translation by Harry W. Robbins of *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, the verse version by Stanley Appelbaum of *The Art of Love* by Ovid, the new verse translation by Allen Mandelbaum of *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, and the prose translation by John Jay Parry of *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus.

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The study of Marie de France's works by recognized researchers Emanuel J. Mickel and Chantal A. Marechal offer a literary context to *The Lais*, in addition to articles by Heather Arden, Peter Dronke, Michelle A. Freeman, Karen K. Jambeck, Susan M. Johnson, Kent Kraft, Yolanda Pontfarcy, Eva Rosenn, Robert M. Stein, and Mary B. Speer.

The analysis of *The Mirror of Simple Souls* uses the translation and introduction of the text by Ellen Babinsky and Robert Lerner. A comparative literature review includes *The City of God* and *Confessions* by St. Augustine and *Summa Theological* by St. Thomas of Aquinas. In addition, the evaluation of the literature context includes the books *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* by Herbert Grundmann, *Seeking Spiritual Intimacy* by Glenn Myers, and *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* by Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff. An examination of the historical framework includes articles by Joseph Berrigan, Gwendolyn Bryant, John Howard, and Barbara Obrist and the PhD dissertation work of Francesca Caroline Bussey, "'The world on the End of a Reed: Marguerite Porete and the annihilation of an identity in Medieval and Modern Representations – a Reassessment.'" Consultation of the papal encyclicals online offers a perspective of the political and religious situation of the Beguines.

The analysis of *The Book of the City of Ladies* uses the translation and introduction by Rosalind Brown-Grant. The book *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* edited by Alcium Blamires offers a comparative evaluation of the treatment of women by male writers within the paternalistic literature of the time. In addition, some articles help complete the evaluation of the socio-political situation, such as those by Charity Cannon Willard, David Hult, Catherine Jones, Roberta L. Krueger, Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, and Ria Vanderauwere.

## PREFACE

### Chapter Organization

The first chapter, “The Written Definition of Woman,” presents a historical, social, religious, and political background to establish the circumstances before the effort to define woman as inferior began, the long process undertaken by male writers in different areas of life, and the circumstances by which women started to rewrite the definition of themselves. Establishing the individual circumstances of the written works is essential to the significance of the texts.

The second chapter, “The Feminization of Masculine Stories into Lais,” analyzes the circumstances that allowed Marie de France to write and her choice of genre, language, style, rhetorical devices and topics, discussing how she feminized the masculine language that she borrowed and presented her approach of the text from a feminist perspective. These tales are about male lust, written in the voice of a woman, using masculine sexual terminology and literary devices (Hanning and Ferrante 5).

The third chapter, “Marguerite Porete: Mirror of God,” makes an analysis of the characteristics and effect of her text, choice of genre, topic, language, style, and rhetorical devices. *The Mirror* threatened the Church’s male authorities by reducing their role to almost nothing in the sanctification process with her theological treatise on the soul as the mirror of God. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* repeats “two points cited as heretical by the canonists: that the soul annihilated in the love of God needs neither to pursue virtue nor perform exterior practices of devotion” (Bryant 208).

The fourth chapter, “Christine de Pizan’s Reinterpretation of Literature,” explores the characteristics of Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* as the first directly-stated defense of womankind, examining the genre, language, style, and rhetorical devices within the

## PREFACE

text. Pizan's determination to rid sin from women's lives results in a plan to design a protective walled city for women of virtue that excludes men (Bizzell and Herzberg 541). Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* is a tract about women's intelligence, chastity, and honor, contradicting the Church's established notion of the *female sinful nature*.

The fifth chapter, "The Redefinition of Woman," consists of an analysis of the progression of the definition of woman in these works based on the choice of rhetorical devices, language, and genre. It briefly restates the historical context before the degenerative conceptualization of woman by male writers, the individual contributions of each text, explaining the progression and relation between them, and it suggests three options for further study in three disciplines: literature, psychology of education, and literary historiography.

## CHAPTER ONE

### I. The Written Definition of Woman

#### Introduction

A written definition of woman as a defective expression of human life was forged by men, inciting women to command the same device to reshape the negative masculine perspective into a realistic concept of the female and her literary voice. It took centuries of continuous efforts by male writers, philosophers, legislators, scientists, and men of the cloth to fabricate a woman who submits by nature; and, it took centuries for women writers to regain command of their own definition. Centuries ago (and still today in many parts of the world), society functioned with a hierarchical structure with man above woman and all other life and things. Women and men co-existed, procuring for the group in the capacity that their circumstances allowed them; they were implicitly unequal partners. However, when writing was invented, this uneven relationship was established by law. The sustained attempts by men to define women as inferior and dictate the limits of their attributes are documented in the Judeo-Christian Bible, the writings of Greek philosophers from the Classical period, Catholic doctrine, and other scientific, literary, humanistic, and legislative texts.

Although most of women's duties might have been manual, literacy was not prohibited to them. However, having the opportunity, men legislated to prevent women from even trying to break out of this state of ignorance, making it almost impossible. Women's instinct and intellect drove many of them to embark on a quest to find their own identity and define their own literary voice each generation of women building on the work of their predecessors.

It is pertinent to reconstruct the living circumstances of women to appreciate their state of mind and the origin of their drive to learn. The way in which women's natural rights were taken away by the written word illustrates its inherent power and the complexities of human psychology. There is evidence of women's intellectual abilities in the literary works of several women before Socrates started defining the role of women in society.

### **Sappho's Poetry in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E.**

Before the Bible and the Greek philosophers codified the notion of women's inferiority to men, there were women who had an intellectual life and probably participated in planning, strategizing, designing, and executing projects. Evidence exists of women thinking, discussing, and engaging in some writing: in Sumer, Enheduanna (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B.C.E., possibly the earliest known author and poet, male or female), in China, Pan Chao (1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.E.), in Rome, Sulpicia (1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.E.), and in Greece, Hortensia (1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.E.), Diotima (4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E.), Aspasia (5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E.), and Sappho (6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E.). George Kennedy explains how "[Sappho] wrote lyric poetry on themes of love and marriage in the first half of the sixth century B.C.E., over a century before the first writing about rhetoric, and she may have directed a kind of finishing school for young girls" (15). Her initiative was exemplary; her ideas were futuristic; and her poetry was superb in technique.

Archeological and literary studies draw a picture of Sappho as a confident, educated, young married woman who ventured into philosophical thinking through poetry. From her position of privilege, Sappho wrote about a universal right to happiness and the primal human need to love and be loved. Her poems celebrate love as the reason for living: a pure emotion shared by human beings, regardless of gender or class. Beyond the rhyme and rhythm of her

words, she introduced the idea of a utopia of love among humans. Along with this, she created hendecasyllabic poetic meter, Sapphic meter, which was successfully used by Catullus and Horace, six centuries later (Groden xiv).

The influence of the Sapphic rhythmic structure carried into the seventeenth century as “[its] short fourth line may offer either a rest or a quick turn to the poem, or even an opportunity for conclusion, as with the final two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet” (Dimitrov). Without a formal education, Sappho developed her craft like one of the best, most passionate and diligent writers, ahead of her time by centuries.

Evidently, this early before the birth of Christ, societies were not strict about limiting the mental development of women. However, a century after Sappho, philosophy was born with Socrates (5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E.), and men began to think, discuss, and legislate, writing definitions and policies that were detrimental to women. Also at the beginning of the Common Era, the Bible was compiled (Old and New Testaments), and these texts along with those by the Greek philosophers came to comprise what men needed to rationalize and officially implement women’s place beneath men.

### **Greek Classical Literature and Scripture**

Philosophical texts, written in the Greek Classical period, and the Bible, written and compiled during the same time, constitute the two parts of the social, political, and moral human structure. The Greek philosophers from this period can be credited with the intellectual and social founding of human civilization, devoting time and pen to the study of human relations and the creation of social systems that would promote and ensure progress. Among these important figures are Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Galen. As well, sharing proximity of geography and

time period, the Bible contains the laws and sanctions, prayers and songs, anecdotes, and parables that the ancient leaders used to guide and control their people.

These philosophical writings and the Bible became inspiration and foundation for many other texts in many other fields, limiting women's access to jobs and professions, educational opportunities, spiritual growth prospects, and artistic occupations, among others. St. Augustine of Hippo (4<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.) and St. Thomas of Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.) wrote extensively to explain the relation of man with God, and how to gain his approval and finally his Grace. In their writings, both Augustine and Aquinas defined women as inferior by nature.

### **Women According to Socrates**

Unfortunately, Sappho's ideas about egalitarianism did not influence posterity as did her literary contributions. Socrates and Plato sustained dialogues to define the role of women in society. They discussed the one and functional difference between the genders, childbearing, and the extent of women's participation in society. Socrates advocated for the inclusion of females in all instructive activities including physical exercise, which males did in the nude, commenting on the possible inconveniences during these practices (Plato VI: V.I.452b).

Although Socrates saw men as superior, physically and intellectually, he encouraged the education of women to a level where they could contribute to society in a manner equal to men. Socrates wanted both genders to “. . . share all duties, though . . . treat the females as the weaker, the males as the stronger” (VI:V.I.451e). He specified: “[w]e educate the men both physically and mentally. . . . We shall have to train the women also, then, in both kinds of skill, and train them for war as well, and treat them in the same way as the men” (VI:V.I.452a). Men, from their self-ascribed higher moral capacity had begun writing laws to ensure the better use of the weaker

humans, the females, to make them equally responsible to sustain society's requirements, thus less of a burden on the stronger.

Sappho's idea of equality to experience love was not challenged by Socrates; it was simply ignored, as he concluded on the best way to “. . . make satisfactory arrangement for the possession and treatment of women and children by [educated] men . . .” (VI:V.I.451c). The role of women was being defined, and their participation was being reduced to the activities lawfully approved by men since according to Socrates “men and women have different natures” (VI:V.I.453e). He thought it necessary to legally make all jobs and activities assignable to women and prescribe how to obtain satisfactory performance from them.

In *The Republic*, Socrates and Plato defined justice, democracy, education, marriage, and family; and, thus, the conceptualization of woman as inferior was put to the pen. In fact, Plato's Academy was not open to female pupils. However, at least two exceptions are documented. Axiothea of Phlius and Lasthenia of Mantinea—who attended sessions disguised as men—were also disciples of Speusippus, who took over the Academy after Plato's death (Wider 50). Axiothea and Lasthenia exhibited extraordinary determination to have an intellectual life in a society in which women's liberty to think was restricted. Greek law did not protect women—even those financially able—unless they lived with a man (Wider 50). This man (husband, relative, or legal guardian) owned the time and service of the women in his household, practically without constraints.

### **Women without Identities**

The notion of the limited functional role of women as instruments of procreation and servitude is denoted in Roman society where girls were not even given a proper first name. The

custom was for women to use as identifier a feminized version of the family name—Claudia, Julia, Cornelia, or Lucretia—and to be distinguished from one another by an adjective—e.g. elder, younger, first, second (Bullough 82). Denying women their individuality illustrates the extent to which women were viewed as part of the satellite support system that family was for men.

As civilizations progressed and used written laws and literature to keep order, men continued to use the written word to control, ridicule, and debase women. Unfortunately, Socrates' plan for inclusive education was not followed, and women were not trained as warriors, engineers, builders, physicians, merchants, or other skilled occupations. Consequently, when women performed poorly at professions for which they were not schooled, men wrote about the ineptitude of the entire gender. Women functioned as dependents because they were only allowed to function as subordinates.

### **Aristotle's Legacy to Women**

A century after Socrates and Plato, Aristotle wrote that slavery is natural to the human condition, thus that “. . . from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjugation, others for rule” (*Politics* I:5.2). He defined the parts of the household as the persons who composed it: slaves and freemen; and, he discussed the three relations operating in the household: master-servant, husband-wife, and parent-child (I:4.1; I:3.2). Aristotle reiterates, “. . . the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior . . . one rules and the other is ruled” (I:5.7). It is clear that for Aristotle one gender is better than the other in all aspects, but he neglects to provide an explanation for the oppressive-subordinated characteristic of this design.

In *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle elaborates on the idea that male and female do not collaborate, but men utilize women to the limited extent of their capacities. He makes unsupported claims about the reproductive functions of each gender that became the foundation for the medical theses of Galen and the theological treatises by Augustine of Hippo and Thomas of Aquinas. Aristotle determined that “the female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e. it lacks one constituent...the principle of Soul” (II:III.737a).

In fact, Aristotle’s dissertation on the characteristics and function of the biological fluids is extensive, concluding that: “the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul from the male, since the Soul is the essence of a particular body” (II:IV.738b). He devalued the merit of the female anatomical condition for childbearing, determining that mothers contributed the animal part of the new human life and fathers provided the seed, the nourishment, and the soul. Aristotle’s concept of woman carries weight because he was and still is an authority in many disciplines. In his text *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined important notions such as the “seven virtues—justice, manly courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, and wisdom” (I:9.3.1366b). Procreation was the only feminine aptitude that males could not substitute, and Aristotle wrote that the female contributes less than half of the effort to the generation of human life.

### **Substandard Medical Care**

More than four hundred years after Aristotle, Claudius Galenus (2<sup>nd</sup> c. C.E.) wrote a treatise on human anatomy, claiming that the female reproductive system is the inverted version of the male reproductive system (Findlen and Bence). According to Charles G. Gross, Galen is

“the most important figure in classical medical science and . . . our best source of information about it” (216). This Greek physician, who was highly regarded during and well after his time, used assumption instead of experimentation and factual evidence to support his theories. Roman law prohibited dissection of human cadavers by 150 B.C.E., so Galen used pigs for this study and based his medical conclusions about the human reproductive function on the findings in a study of a different species (Aufderheide 5).

In fact, the study of the female reproductive anatomy was still done using a sow until the late thirteenth century when the first human dissections were performed in Bologna and its findings incorporated in Mondino de' Luzzi's *Anatomia*, completed in 1316 (Thomasset 48-54). Galen's unproven theory served as basis for diagnosis and treatment of female patients. And, when death occurred, to mother and/or child, men got another woman and/or another child. Galen's oversight is not as great as that of the physicians who continued to use this information to treat women's gynecological needs well into the eighteenth century.

Pregnancy and other exclusively feminine matters (such as exterior physical development, the emotional and psychological effects of hormonal activity, and the inconveniences and mystery of menstruation) were out of men's understanding and control. But, instead of embracing this as part of God's plan, men rejected and deemed it almost bestial. Childbirth and menstruation rendered women the epitome of uncleanness, demanding of them purification rituals and limiting their ability to perform certain tasks (Gies 9). Keeping the mother well nourished and rested during pregnancy and breast-feeding was not a concern. Consequently, women endured medical neglect—physical and mental—resulting in disabilities and, often, death.

### **No Maternal Rights**

In ancient societies, men had a responsibility to defend and grow the community, and choosing a good mate—productive in all aspects—was crucial. Archeological evidence and historical documentation support the idea that in Roman society the creation and conservation of human life was seen as little more than a fortunate or unfortunate natural event. A Roman father did not *have* a child; he *took* and *raised* it up from the ground (where the midwife placed it immediately after birth) “thus indicating that he recognized the infant as his own and declined to expose it” (Veyne 9). Conversely, unhealthy or deformed infants—and many times healthy girls—died from exposure, as fathers had absolute rights over life on earth.

Women were impregnated, sometimes against their will, but could not choose to keep their children, healthy or not. In this system, motherhood was the most important function of the females, but it was only a physiological attribute. Infant exposure was a Roman practice that Christianity helped eradicate. Nonetheless, the laws—civil and religious—continued for centuries to award exclusive custody rights of the children to the father. In fact, it is Christianity also that changed the role of motherhood to one of respect and even reverence because of the Virgin Mary.

### **The Virginity of Mary**

It is difficult to argue against scripture and explain God’s decision to create his son from the unclean body of a woman (Job 25:4). Thomas of Aquinas quotes Augustine to explain God’s decision to use an imperfect vessel to procreate his son. Augustine explains, “[i]t was suitable that man’s liberation should be made manifest in both sexes. Consequently, since it behooved a man, being of the nobler sex, to assume, it was becoming that the liberation of the female sex

should be manifested in that man being born of a woman” (qtd. in Aquinas Q.31:4).

Unable to explain the act of procreation without the participation of Joseph, thus the immaculate conception of Jesus, Aquinas makes a statement of faith in regards to the virginity of Mary. He declares, “[w]e must confess simply that the Mother of Christ was a virgin in conceiving for to deny this belongs to the heresy of the Ebionites and Cerinthus, who held Christ to be a mere man, and maintained that He was born of both sexes” (Q.28:1). However, the virginal conception of Jesus awarded women an immaculate and unattainable quality.

In the minds of ancient men, women had two personas: chaste and submissive or lustful and cunning. Augustine and Aquinas relied on these two biblical models to define women in Christian doctrine. In the Old Testament women are represented by Eve, the temptress responsible for man’s fall, and in the New Testament women are represented by Mary, the virginal mother of Christ. The model of Eve—sinful and dangerous—is a misrepresentation, and the model of Mary—saint and asexual—is improbable.

### **Inferior and Wicked Women**

The Old Testament offers many stories where women are depicted as cunning and dishonorable; among these women are Lot’s wife, Delilah, Salome, Jezebel, and Herodias. The case of Lot goes even further in its patriarchal interpretation of justified incest, serving as an example of the convoluted dichotomy of the innocent man and the wicked woman. Lot, an old widower, had sexual relations with both of his daughters, procreating two children. Scripture dismisses this man’s unlawful behavior (the bible condemns incest) on account of his being inebriated by his daughters who think they and their father are the only people left on earth, and, therefore, make themselves responsible for repopulating the planet (Gen. 19:30-36).

Lot's daughters' conspiracy, Eve's disobedience—not Adam's—and other examples like these justify the laws and other measures to control women. The Ten Commandments are unmistakably directed at men, and half of them are about property rights (Deut. 5:6-21). Not to covet thy neighbor's wife and not to commit adultery are matters of property. Deuteronomy defines rape, virginity, marriage, and divorce in terms of infringement on another man's possession (Deut. 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25).

### **The Definition of Sexual Crimes**

Women in ancient societies lived by these conditions pronounced in the Old and New Testaments, which were available only to the leaders, all male rulers. The convenient interpretation of a discriminating selection of passages was critical to justify savagery, murder, and slavery. Protection was not the purpose of these laws; the purpose was control through brutal chastisement. To illustrate this point, three books from the Old Testament are explicit about the proper punishment for sexual crimes. The Book of Deuteronomy orders the stoning of a girl victim of rape if she did not cry for help during the assault (22:23-24). It did not matter if she was a devout young girl; it was assumed that she did not ask for help because she enjoyed the violent act.

In addition, Leviticus instructs that the daughter of a priest “shall be burned to death” if she commits fornication, regardless of her age or coercion exerted upon her because this act brings disgrace to her father (21:9). The book of Numbers, while discussing the treatment of the captives orders to “[s]lay...every male, child and every woman who . . . had intercourse with a man...but [to] keep for [themselves] all girls who had no intercourse with a man” (31:17-18).

This law orders the disposal of the impure slaves by death, keeping the useful—virginal—slave girls.

Furthermore, Deuteronomy's treatment of rape shows absolute disregard for human dignity and complete absence of mercy for the innocent and the weaker, prescribing marriage as the sanction for the rapist. Forcing marriage on the man who raped a girl, inflicts cruel punishment on her. In addition, pecuniary sanction is assigned. The book states that "[i]f a man comes upon a maiden...takes her and has relations with her...[he] shall pay the girl's father fifty silver shekels and take [her] as his wife (22:28). Deuteronomy goes further in the mistreatment of the victim because it forbids the rapist to divorce her. It was possible to execute such cruelty on the innocent because men attributed these laws to God. Throughout time, passages like these have been omitted or justified in order to make of Christianity a religion of forgiveness and love. The Middle Ages would enjoy the emergence of mystic literature, based on the idea that God is a loving father, whose grace comes to women through suffering.

### **Contradictions and Confusion in Scripture**

The compilation we now come to regard as the Bible, made up of what is commonly referred to as the Old Testament and the New Testament, lacks consistency and cohesion. For Christians this is the book of rules. Even more, it is the word of God. However, an analysis of the entire collection reveals that some passages are ambiguous, others are too specific to be applied through time and space, and some contain confusing contradictions. This characteristic of the Bible was used to distort or redirect rulings according to circumstance.

These features, ambiguity and contradiction, are well exemplified in the matter of divorce. The Book of Deuteronomy (Old Testament) gives direction as to the requirements and

procedure for a man to divorce his wife, while the Gospel of Luke (New Testament) practically forbids divorce, and the Gospel of Mark (New Testament) describes Jesus explaining this discrepancy with insufficiency.

Deuteronomy instructs that “[w]hen a man, after marrying a woman and having relations with her, is later displeased with her...he writes out a bill of divorce...dismissing her from his house” (24:1). It is relevant to note that the wife, who did not own property, would have walked away with the clothes on her and perhaps some utensils for survival. The following verses describe how the woman may marry and divorce other men, and how it is an abomination for the first husband to remarry her even after the death of the second husband (24:2-4). The book does not explain the branding of abomination on this act.

In contrast, the Gospel of Luke decrees, “[e]veryone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. The man who marries a woman divorced from her husband likewise commits adultery” (16:18). Yet, a little known passage in the Gospel of Mark describes how Jesus, when confronted by the Pharisees with this contradiction, explains that “. . . [Moses] wrote that commandment for [them] because of [their] stubbornness” (10:2-5). Mark continues relating the explanation offered by Jesus who cites Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 and repeats Luke 16:18.

The Christian prohibition on divorce that prevailed in medieval times—and subsists to the day, especially in the Roman Catholic Church—ignores the instructions on how to divorce a wife stated in Deuteronomy. The marriage laws in this book provide for the husband to find a wife that pleases him by allowing him to try until he finds her. Furthermore, the Gospel of Luke protects the property rights of the husband by making sure the wife does not find another man that would support her. In contrast, Catholic tradition favors the Gospel of Luke in which the prohibition of divorce is absolute. In ancient times, this law resulted in lamentable consequences

for the woman. A wife dismissed from her husband's house—left to her own devices—could easily be driven into prostitution or mendicancy since no man was allowed to marry her. On the other hand, men could keep concubines—who could only be previously unmarried women. This law favored men with means who could afford more women.

### **Reduced Legal Protection**

The designation of inferiority resulted also in reduced legal protection for women. Men of the law simply did not think women needed protection besides what they provided, forgetting about the orphaned, the childless widows, and the disowned. In addition, men of science saw the female body as the flawed depository of the human baby until birth. Therefore, the purpose of the law was to ensure the better use of the female gender.

The protection of women meant to have better control over them. During the twelfth century a woman's presence was still not permitted inside a courtroom, so they could not be sued. Making ill use of this rule, men wrote a law that allowed women to own property, protecting their assets from legal recourse (Bullough, *Subordinate* 87). The Greeks had a custom that became law in England during medieval times: “. . . women had to be in somebody's custody . . . to be loved and protected . . .” (Casagrande 87). Therefore, even if the woman did not need financial support, she had to have a husband or a legal guardian. This legal guardian, spouse, or relative had control of her assets.

### **Solidifying the Notion of Women's Inferiority**

With the conversion of Constantine I to Christianity (4<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.), the Roman leadership imposed what would become Catholicism on those they conquered—e.g. Gallia and Britannia—

and dissemination of the Bible universalized its moral code, which comprised a fusion of pagan and Christian traditions (McGiffert 28). Augustine of Hippo (4<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.), credited Socrates “as the first to turn the whole of philosophy towards the improvement and regulation of morality” (*City* VIII.3). Augustine also adopted Platonism, for “...Plato says that the wise man is the man who imitates, knows and loves his God, and that participation in this God brings man happiness...” (VIII.5). St. Augustine helped fuse Christianity and Paganism in this fashion.

The double standard that Socrates championed is repeated in Christian doctrine. Particular passages from the Bible were for many centuries the basis for the law of the land, and the selective biased interpretation of some sections produced a written notion of women as unintelligent, emotionally fragile, physically vulnerable, and morally unreliable. As Catholic doctrine and biblical scripture propagated, they cemented the notion of women as inferior to men. Genesis 1:27 briefly mentions simultaneous creation, but Genesis 2:18-23—more widely known—establishes a hierarchy, with man just below God, as master of all other life and things, including woman, to be used at his discretion and for his benefit.

St. Thomas of Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.) applied simple inference in his *Summa Theologica* to claim that women are inferior by divine design, following the pattern used by Augustine, who used Socrates as reference. Aquinas explains how “it was necessary for woman to be made, as the Scripture says, as a *helper* to man; not, indeed, as a *helpmate* in other works, as some say, since man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works” (Q.92.1).

Through a linguistic sleight of hand, therefore, Aquinas relegates women to a subservient role, dependent on men, never equal. For St. Thomas, human beings need an authority to coordinate the pursuit of individual goods while promoting the common good of society in the form of human positive law, which derives from natural law (Cornish 559). For men, that

authority was God; for women, however, the authority was men since Eve was created from Adam. St. Thomas of Aquinas and St. Augustine saw woman as an instrument of service to man.

### **Chastity and Literacy**

Nonetheless, life in a convent—despite its isolation, celibacy, and servitude—was an alternative for girls who wished to avoid sharing the matrimonial bed with any man who could afford them. Religion muddied the already complex topic of human sexuality. Aurelius Augustinus, later St. Augustine (4<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.), who converted to Christianity at age 32 after a life of vice and degradation—as told in his book *Confessions*—wrote extensively about human sexuality, declaring it an abomination of nature, in his theological treatise *The City of God* (Bizzell and Herzberg 450). Augustine attached the one irreplaceable reproductive function women provided for men to an ungodly act.

St. Paul, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas of Aquinas wrote rules of conduct that went beyond Scripture to impose strict controls on women’s chastity—their morality in general—and their liberty to learn. In his First Epistle, St. Paul was emphatic about permitting a woman only to “learn in silence and . . . [prohibiting her] to act as teacher or in any way to have authority over a man” (Tim. 2:11-12). However, in the convent women could read, write, and teach other women. Approximately ten centuries after St. Paul’s edict religious women were ignoring this part of the bible to obey their natural urge to learn.

Research demonstrates that religious women began to write spiritual literature in the tenth century, and a slow but steady effort to rewrite the concept of woman began in Europe. Women became writers and the quest to find their own identity went on for centuries. Women’s notion of themselves had become distorted by the seemingly divinely prescribed nature and place accorded

to them by men. In spite of women's obligation to be more virtuous, more submissive, more productive, more spiritual, more fertile, and more silent, their social and political progress was slowed down by a sustained effort to oppress them. The advances were individual, sporadic, using different modalities, addressing different topics, and sometimes charging too publicly and aggressively. Unfortunately, not all succeeded in their attempt to safely rebel against the unrealistic negative ideas men had and wrote.

In response to their systematic denigration, women found opportunities to write in ways that both reflected, and subtly challenged, the subservient role they assumed in medieval society. As Heather Arden emphasizes, “[w]omen in the Middle Ages grew up in an extensive sex-role system... [in which]...the roles of women and men [are] clearly distinguished” (213). An understanding of the female struggle to write is pertinent to this study because women write from the perspective of the lesser position in a system of two forces: female and male.

Nevertheless, women were beginning to educate themselves, teach in the convents, and write in many different genres. Hildegard Von Bingen (12<sup>th</sup> c. C. E.) is one of not too many women who found in the convent the opportunity to write music, poetry, plays, biographies, and religious and medicinal texts. Her *Physica* is a catalog of plants, animals, and elements, which demonstrates her interest in science, a field also dominated by men.

### **The Dichotomy of Love and Conquest**

The social system that uplifted virgins and depreciated women for having intercourse, even once and willingly or not, transcended religion and politics, finding its way into literature. The western concepts of romantic feelings and relations and the proper way to practice them was called courtly love. Men wrote detailed instructions on the correct exercise of romantic

courtship. Although this new way of looking at women elevated some to a certain degree, it also created a larger distance between classes. This was a system in which “[t]he knight was a champion of God and the ladies, and the great majority of women who were not ladies remained unchampioned [sic]” (Power 19). Moreover, the Church makes another radical distinction. While within this social arrangement men placed women on pedestals, like goddesses, Christian doctrine placed them in subordination to men. Aquinas offers an answer to his own question: “[w]hether the image of God is found in every man? . . . [replying that] . . . man is the beginning and end of woman; and God is the beginning and end of every creature” (*Summa* Q.93.4).

The Bible made the purpose of women on earth clear, procreation, but this notion became intertwined with romantic love in the twelfth century. This situation caused confusion because high-class women were to be worshiped, loved, and rescued by honorable valiant knights, while peasant women were perceived as having a bestial nature and deemed incapable of feeling love. Andreas Capellanus’ manual for amatory or romantic practices *The Art of Courtly Love* grants men the right to forcefully take a woman of lower class since a courteous approach would only be wasted on one who responds only with animal instinct and could not possibly feel love (X:XI).

### **Sex is Sinful**

It seems that educated men had great difficulty with the matter of sex, turning it from a complex issue into a convoluted notion that negated a natural biological function and physical form of expression. Men thought it necessary to register human sexual acts and collect fees and fines for them; they defined which were appropriate and which were inappropriate, assigning a monetary value to each. Documentation shows that in medieval times people paid fines to the

Church for unauthorized sexual activity or legerwite (Jones 945). The Domesday Book is a record of this tax on cohabitation from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries; it was a way of collecting revenue and preventing marriages from being made and then broken (North 4). Female sexuality was a matter of property that needed control.

Women were not allowed to acknowledge their sexuality since Augustine deemed it a necessary abomination of nature, and men believed that women were more susceptible to lust because of their weaker spiritual character (Duby, Barthelemy and La Ronciere 77). Being considered merely anatomically defective instruments of procreation and providers only of manual labor gave women a meager and risky existence (Power 76).

Even architectural design was tailored to suit men's need to safeguard their women. Castles had an area dedicated to the ladies where only the lord had free access, called *chamber des dames*. However, this “. . . was not a place of seduction or amusement but a kind of prison in which women were incarcerated because men feared them” (Duby, Barthelemy and La Ronciere 77). Women who did not comply with the rules created difficulties. Women were, in general, problematic for men. On the other hand, it must have been confusing for a girl—and even a woman—to understand being seduced and used, protected and imprisoned, belittled and feared.

### **Better Times in the Twelfth Century**

Nonetheless, having lived through the second crusade, and despite the little access women had to literacy, their sociopolitical situation began to change by the twelfth century. Historical evidence exists of women participating in political affairs and scholarly activities. Two excellent examples are Eleanor of Aquitaine and Heloise d'Argenteuil. Eleanor of Aquitaine helped extend the power of the English throne of her husband Henry II after the annulment of her

marriage to Louis VII; and she was a patroness of literature as well as her daughter Marie de Champagne (Bailey). Heloise, an illegitimate child under the tutelage of her uncle, received an education from one of the best scholars at the time, Pierre Abelard (Radice 90). The two fell in love, and they married in secret to protect his professional advancement; she went to live in the convent of which she became abbess, and he became a monk after the castration he suffered by order of her uncle (91-92).

Heloise is the perfect combination of passion and intellect in feminine form belying the definitions in her day of women as intellectually inferior and solely governed by their corrupting desires. She was called a “leader in the Lord’s army . . . complimented for pouring out the *hidden sweetness* of Scripture both for her nuns and . . . for all other women . . .” (Blamires, *Case* 193). The letters between the lovers portray a faithful wife, committed to her marriage vows to the extreme of dedicating her life to God. However, and despite her scholarly and religious accomplishments, Jean de Meun makes a disrespectful and distasteful mention of her in *Roman de la Rose* (13<sup>th</sup> c. C.E.). The poem alludes to her nakedness and describes forceful coitus between the spouses (L.8745-8956).

### **The Relevance of the Three Texts**

The written assaults by men became the catalyst for a response, and women began to forge a positive definition of the feminine identity using also the written word. In the twelfth century, *The Lais of Marie de France*, a translation and transcription of Breton stories in verse and in vernacular Old French, became the first compilation of masculine tales in the voice of a woman. In the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a theological treatise, written completely in feminine voice, cost Marguerite Porete her life for

challenging Catholic dogma. And, in the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan wrote the first directly-stated defense of womankind. *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a catalogue of women's accomplishments, historical and mythological, including plans for a city inhabited only by virtuous women. The three texts are solid steps towards the careful redefinition of woman, from the female perspective, and in a female voice.

Marie de France wrote lais from stories about the fortune and misfortune of knights, feminizing them, and creating a work that is representative of the genre. Marguerite Porete wrote a theological thesis to become the reflection of God by the power of love and charity; her analytical deduction and use of rhetorical theory added to the genre, for it is not built upon the works of other Christian or Pagan writers as Augustine had done in *City of God* and as Aquinas had done in *Summa Theologica*. And, Christine de Pizan dared and succeeded in turning the argument around, contradicting the idea that "men are corrupted by women," building a city where women can more easily be virtuous because both lust and men are banned.

## CHAPTER TWO

### II. The Feminization of Masculine Stories into Lais

#### Introduction

In the twelfth century, at a time when few women were literate, two centuries before Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer, a woman named Marie, from France, learned to write and took the stories of male adventures told by the Bretons, materializing them into *The Lais of Marie de France*. De France composed the most representative collection of lais. According to Lucien Foulet “all the texts which could rightfully be called lais were direct imitations of Marie, including the prologues . . .” (qtd. in Mickel 57). De France’s work was popular considering that “her lais were translated or adapted in many languages—Old Norse, Middle English, Middle High German, Italian, and Latin—during the Middle Ages” (Ferrante “French Courtly Poet” 64). Marie de France is France’s first poetess, second only to Chretien de Troyes, one of the most celebrated writers of French vernacular literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Mickel 13). When de France writes narrative poetry of the Breton tales in vernacular, she takes men’s stories to retell them in her own words. *The Lais of Marie de France* marks the moment in literature when a woman appropriates stories that belonged to men, imprinting a feminine perspective and literary voice.

#### Social Context

At this time as ladies-in-waiting, women read to entertain their lady and were taught to write to assist with personal correspondence. If they had occasion, some wrote poetry or composed songs. In the convent, women also became literate, and the genres and topics were

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mystical, scientific, didactic, love poems, and songs. Emanuel Mickel explains that “[t]hroughout the period there was keen interest in scientific and didactic material (such as bestiaries, volucraries, and lapidaries)” (31). Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179), a nun and contemporary of de France, was “. . . a finer embodiment than most of her masculine counterparts of what the term ‘Poetic Genius’ implies . . .” (Kraft 109). She wrote important medical and botanical treatises and spiritual literature, poetry, songs, and at least a play; spirituality and romantic love were in vogue. As a young woman, de France finds herself surrounded by these topics, for “in the literature of the period and in the philosophical and theological treatises, love becomes the dominant subject” (Mickel 27). It was natural that de France was interested in love stories, but she was interested in the male angle and in adding a feminist approach.

### **Thesis Statement**

Marie de France devised the opportunity of writing the Breton stories as *lais*, fusing her voice and viewpoint into a masculine oral literary tradition, appropriating and revising their content, and, ironically, creating what would become the “last version” that served as the foundation for other writers to imitate.

Although de France writes about the adventures of knights, she provides the female characters with a voice if not a name, telling the stories from their perspective. Using subtle but effective rhetorical constructions, she includes examples of both moral and powerful women to counter the negative depictions created by men. De France writes male protagonist characters as realistically flawed heroes, provoking with their imperfections more sympathy, allowing a balance between this and the magic in the stories. The women in the *lais* are also realistically portrayed: capable of sacrifice and true love. The heroes strategically exhibit conduct that in a

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woman would be criticized as negative stereotypical female behavior, but that in men would be excused.

### **Literary Context**

Some of de France's contemporaries, Geoffrey Monmouth, Geoffrey Gaimar, and Robert Wace, similarly drew from oral literature. Other genres from the same period, *roman* and *chanson de geste*, also offer the difficult reality of an oral tradition. The book that Monmouth claims to have used for his *Historia Regum Britanniae* has not been found or cited by anyone else, causing to suspect that King Arthur, of whom no records exists, was brilliant imaginative fiction. The earliest reference to the term *lais* is found in Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut*, which he based on Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (52). Like de France, Wace was a poet feeding from the words of another writer. According to Emanuel Mickel, ". . . the narrative lai represented a story version of which the lyric lai were only the poetic essence" (53-54). The genre did not live long nor did it have many examples, but the poetry is accessible, popular, entertaining, and thought-provoking. In form, content, and variety the *lais* of Marie de France reflect the trends and interests of the literary renaissance in the twelfth century (33). Marie de France was writing like her contemporary male writers.

### **De France's Intellectual Background**

Little is known and much is speculated about the identity of Marie de France, and this is relevant to this study because it illustrates the historical moment that gave this woman time and talent to write. Unlike many modern women, a few medieval women of privilege could find opportunities to study on their own when the materials were available. This was also a time when

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men were only beginning to put their names to historical texts and legends or taking credit for something they had written, but only a few women were able or allowed to do so. William Fox proposes that Marie de France is Mary Abbess of Shaftesbury, natural daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet, father of Henry II (qtd. in Mickel 21). She might not have been the first to dedicate and present a text to the king, but she was one of few women circulating her writings among men.

Her legitimacy as the author of at least three works has been sufficiently documented despite the mystery of her origin and social position: (1) twelve short narrative tales in verse edited as the *Lais*, (2) the *Fables* which she translated from English into Old French, and (3) a translation of a Latin saint's life entitled *Espurgatoire Saint Patriz* (Mickel 13). Emanuel Mickel's analysis of the three texts shows that she had an unusual level of learning and spoke Latin, English, Romance, and Old French, did extensive study, and fed from the literature of Virgil and Ovid (1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.) and from her contemporaries Geoffrey of Monmouth, Robert Wace, and Geoffrey Gaimar (21-22). The three works attributed to her are "in three different genres—Breton tale, animal fable, spiritual voyage—each of which blends literary traditions and linguistic registers . . ." (Krueger 172). Marie de France was a dedicated reader, a trained writer—even if self-trained—and had time for this kind of work.

De France lived in the era of courtly love, and the dichotomy of courtship was a particularly difficult concept to understand for women, being simultaneously adored and enslaved. Provençal literature had its golden period in the second half of the twelfth century in which chivalry or the chivalrous idea was a "key-note of the period. . . [and it] inculcated an overwhelming and almost fantastic regard for women; it raised love-making to a formal system" (Kitchin 9).

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Being the wrong gender in a sex-role-system presents two alternatives: be content with it or not. Eloquently, Heather Arden states that “Marie’s gender [is] relevant to understanding the *Lais* not because of her biological sex but because society treated her like a woman” (212). It is possible that some women agreed with the treatment they received, but among those that disagreed, de France was able to explain it and put it in octosyllabic couplets that did not offend the men.

### **Historical Context**

Politics, religion, commerce, and literature all contributed to the broadening of the intellectual experience of the time. The Norman invasion of England in 1066 turned France into a mecca of cultural exchange, giving Marie de France access to the Breton stories, Greek literature, and a more global understanding of the world. King Henry II of England, allegedly her half brother, married Eleanor of Aquitaine after her separation from King Louis VII of France and virtually controlled all of Western France from the Somme River to the Pyrenees, acquiring ties with the rulers of Saxony, Sicily, and Castile (Mickel 26; McCash 191-93).

The Crusades provided “exposure to customs, political systems, styles of art, and modes of thought different from their own. . . . [and a new ] interest in Greek traditions radiating from Byzantium” (Mickel 25). The works of Ovid, Horace, Cicero, Sallust, Seneca, and Terrence were consulted as moralist texts. Christians were reading the Pagans, and literary genres were developing and emerging.

The Catholic Church was undergoing many changes, and its authority came into question every time the monarch disagreed with the pope in turn. Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was made a martyr in 1170 when Henry II ordered his death and was canonized

three years later by Pope Alexander (“Becket”). During the time when de France was alive—considering that no record exists of her birth or death—more than eight popes were in office.

### **The Characteristics of the Collection**

A collection of short stories with a variety of characters and plots was a safe enough venue for a woman to explore ideas about deception, low instincts, dishonor, and sex. On this platform, de France could explore a concept, expand on it, and find balance for taking such liberties on a different story within the series. Research supports the claim that “Guigemar” was intended to be the first lai in this collection (Mickel 57). It is relevant to find the place of this story because it addresses a complex topic in an unorthodox way. The selection of the language aimed to carve for the lais a space in the popular culture since so much was being written in the vernacular at the time. French versions of ancient Latin text were being produced, such as adaptations of Ovidian texts, following the growing interest in the subject of love (31-32). De France merged her talent into the artistic moment. According to Mickel, “[w]hat is striking is how clearly Marie’s work accords with the different types of literature then appearing and with the spirit of the period” (32-33). The lais could be read straight from her text to people who did not speak Latin or Celtic languages. The French people, the learned and the unlearned, could either read or listen to readings of these stories about Breton knights, which had in addition the perspective of a woman. Robert Stein explains, “the emergence of vernacular manuscript authorship culture—the emergence, in other words, of the possibility of contemporary authorship—makes the implications of intertextuality both conscious and unconscious unavoidable for the medieval writer of vernacular fiction” (281-82). That is to say that de France became part of the group of authors people were reading; she was using public domain stories

and writing them in the language of the Norman French audience who would read them (mostly men), inserting a feminine voice into them.

It is indispensable to begin on a three partite premise: the Breton tales are stories of male adventures shared among the common folk; they were translated into the Norman French vernacular, and written in verse; and the writer was a woman. In the Prologue, de France states her desire to preserve the Breton tales from being lost in the mist of language and time (L.37). Her vision of what constitutes literature and culture was open and inclusive, embracing the full essence of the stories: the nameless female characters, the negative depictions of some of them, and the blatant sexuality.

### **The Feminine Voice in the Lais**

De France's use of vivid sensual imagery and metaphor counterbalances her realistic depiction of human psychology. Eva Rosenn claims, ". . . it is possible to trace one woman's attempt to find or create a space for her own voice within masculine discourse . . . [opposing] fantasy to reality in order to develop a realm in which she as a woman can speak and in which she can explore social prescriptions for individual behavior" (225). De France uses the complexity of the plots and the interaction of fantasy and reality to explore the reach of her own voice, of her own experience. Rosenn explains, "it is Marie's relation to (masculine) textual authority in the *Lais* that comprises a distinctly feminine discourse" (227). The very act of a woman assuming the masculine language makes the language feminine.

The story lines revolve around the triumphs and tribulations of the male protagonists. Understandably, sexuality is at the core of the plots, covering different expressions of lust and romantic love from a man's perspective. Six centuries earlier, Pope Gregory The Great declared

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lust a deadly sin, but men had special dispensation. According to Church tradition, lust uses women to corrupt men, and the *lais* show many examples of the negative effects of love in a man. An honorable knight commits adultery consumed by sexual desire, and more than one jealous husband has his wife locked in a tower to protect her chastity. The *lais*, fictional and enriched with mythological creatures and magical events, provide sociopolitical context and cultural perspective.

### **The Psychology in the Lais**

Heather Arden provides a gender-based psychological study of the characters in the *lais*. Being familiar with Latin translations of works in Greek, de France could have had access to psychology tracts, a discipline in development in Greece (Mickel 21). She expressed her interest in philosophy in the *Fables* (qtd. in Mickel 37). According to Arden, Marie brings to the *lais* the concepts of separation and connection as opposite experiences of girls and boys, using verses that are linked to both the preceding line and the subsequent in a linking and subordinating exercise between people (217). Instead of trying to write like a man, de France writes poetry of these tales, bringing her experience as a woman to the stories without changing them. She succeeded as a writer because her version preserved and honored male oral literature.

### **Authorship**

De France credited the Breton tales not only to state the true origin of the material but also as a safeguard against censure, considering that the overt sexuality in them is intrinsic, and that the primary audience was a man—the king. It was pertinent not to rid the stories of the

explicitness of the intimate encounters. On the contrary, de France embellished them; she adorned them with metaphor, imagery, and magic.

The Prologue includes her statement of authorship—in first person—and she names herself in the first lai, but uses passive voice to credit God for the opportunity to write and to denounce the possibility of intellectual property misappropriation. Twenty-three lines, at the beginning of the first tale, “Guigemar,” are also dedicated to state authorship, defending her God-given responsibility to use her talent to tell stories and defending her good character against possible malicious accusations. The passion in these lines suggests that she could have been a victim of this grievance and was trying to prevent another one. She asserts her authorship and scholarship in “Guigemar,” asking her lords to “. . . listen . . . to the words of Marie . . .” (L.3).

### **Stories of Women**

The design of the characters had to adhere to the original story, be true to her personal experience—as a female artist—and allow little to be concluded in the way of bias towards women. She gave female and male characters virtues and flaws, finding a contextual balance, ad hoc to the time and place. Nonetheless, she took the liberty of dedicating many lines to explain the pain and frustration of the women’s positions. Details that might have been ignored by a man are emphasized, such as the circumstances of an arranged marriage to an abusive and much older husband. In fact, de France celebrated the stories, not the heroes.

### **Methodology**

An analysis of the Prologue (56 lines) and five of the twelve lais: “Guigemar” (1<sup>st</sup> lai - 886 lines), “Equitan” (2<sup>nd</sup> lai - 314 lines), “Lanval” (5<sup>th</sup> lai - 646 lines), “Yonec” (7<sup>th</sup> lai - 554

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lines), and “Eliduc” (12<sup>th</sup> lai - 1067 lines) will show de France’s ability to build a collection that offers readers a strong opening, an overall strategic design, and variety in plots and lengths of the individual pieces. According to Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante’s introduction to the translation used for this study, “[t]he combination of variety, virtuosity, and economy of means that characterizes the twelve short stories . . . gives ample and constant evidence of Marie’s mastery of plot, characterization, and diction . . .” (1). The length of the *lais* is closely tied to their complexity, so it is apt to explore the two longest, two of medium length, and one that is the longest of the short ones. In order of presentation these five *lais* are the first two, the fifth and seventh, and the last. Although less than half of the *lais* are present in this study, more than 60% of the lines in the collection are subjected to this analysis.

The examination explores the introduction of a feminine voice and feminine approach to the text: order of the events in the story, adjudging of dialogue to a woman and its tone, moral context of the characters—male and female—use of role reversal, use of imagery, metaphors, magical artifacts, duality, the perception of romantic love, marital and extramarital sex, and the relation to Christianity.

The first *lai* is about a knight’s awakening to sexuality, mirroring his experience with that of a woman. The second *lai* is the story of a king who succumbs to lust, turning the woman object of his desire into the villain that gets them both killed. The third *lai* is a stereotypical sexual male fantasy with a feminist approach. The fourth *lai* is the story of a boy whose destiny was determined by his father, told from his mother’s perspective. And the fifth *lai*—which appears last in the collection—is the tale of a man loved by two virtuous women, who do not fight over him, but rather the three lovers retreat to religious lives.

**Rhetorical and Literary Analysis**

**The Prologue**

De France presents the collection with a passive voice explicatory statement of her talent and her responsibility to write.

Whoever has received knowledge  
and eloquence in speech from God  
should not be silent or secretive  
but demonstrate it willingly. (L.1-4)

The Prologue explains the ancient convention to “speak...obscurely,” allowing future readers to interpret from their own wisdom (L.11-16). Marguerite Porete (14<sup>th</sup> c.) used the same rhetorical device and included a similar explanation to introduce her book two centuries after de France. More importantly, about a half a century after Porete, Geoffrey Chaucer (14<sup>th</sup> c.) also used the device of obscurity, writing a prologue that, as a precaution, states in ambiguous terms the author’s political position. In contrast, Christine de Pizan (15<sup>th</sup> c.) explained the ambiguity in paternalistic text as antiphrasis, preferring the use of Socratic irony to incite the reader to analyze the text from a feminine perspective.

In the case of de France though, she must justify her initiative and ability to write, so she states: “. . . I began to think / about composing some good stories / and translating from Latin to Romance” (L.28-30). Furthermore, Rosenn argues that in the prologue Marie “uses deliberate obscurity to situate herself both in and out of masculine discourse” (226). Indeed, de France insinuates that she composed and translated the stories, but she does not make an open claim.

This also supports her statement of humility and her accusation of others' boastful attitude (L.31-32). It offers a vague warning against envious people who would "ruin . . . reputations" (L.9-11).

The use of ambiguity allowed de France to publicly express her censure against that practice.

### **Guigemar**

This is the second longest and most complex lai in the collection. It is about a young man's painful awakening to sexuality, which includes a groin injury when he is wounded by the same arrow he uses to kill a white doe that sports the antlers of a stag. Instead of starting the series with the tale of a man who gets all the women, all the riches, and all the glory, de France opens with the story of a virginal young man and his first and traumatic sexual experience, which includes some of the most sensual metaphors de France wrote. The hero is loved by everyone, but he exhibits unbecoming behavior for a valiant and honorable knight. Guigemar refuses women, injures himself, is rescued by a woman, leaves her behind when they are discovered having an affair, and she is the one who finds him again.

Duality is everywhere in this lai. Guigemar has a sister, who, unlike most of the women in the Breton stories has a name, Noguent, like a twin sibling of the other sex (L.34-37). The mythological creature used by de France in this tale has an ambiguous sexual identity and a didactic function. It is an allegory of the human sexual experience in the time's socio historical and religious context: multifaceted and moralistic, a ". . .hind with a fawn /a completely white beast / with deer's antlers on her head" (L.90-92). The physical injury on his thigh, the opening to the vessel, and his metaphorically broken heart all allude to the rupture of a woman's hymen. According to Robert Stein, "in this scene Guigemar experiences the opening of desire as a breach, a loss that opens a series of losses, a wound opening a series of other wounds" (282). The

loss of virginity is irreversible and the beginning of painful and jeopardizing events for a woman, but it is the knight who is experiencing all this. Guigemar is a healthy, attractive, young knight, rendered defenseless by the mythological creature. This event forces the knight to accept genuine charity, mimicking the vulnerability of a woman relinquishing chastity. Although the experience in the story is attributed to the knight, by discussing it with such sympathy and compassion, it provokes empathy for the female sexual experience.

De France creates mirroring images of the loss of virginity experienced by both genders (L.98-118). The sexual duality of the beast mirrors the opposing sexual allegory of Guigemar and the young woman entering the ship like the male sexual organ enters the feminine chamber, but in this case the knight enters the vessel feeling pain, contrasting with her casual and confident attitude. The scenes of sexual relations do not compare in sensuality to the erotic metaphor of the beautiful untouched vessel, which he boards in great pain (L.154-88). In the case of men, the loss of virginity is more of a voluntary act than in the case of women. For Hanning and Ferrante, “. . . the hind is an image of the full sexual existence. . . that Guigemar has attempted to stifle and kill in himself. . . [T]he presumed death of the hind implies that Guigemar has ended his phase of asexual self-sufficiency” (*The Lais* 56). According to Robert Stein, de France designs this self-sufficient androgynous creature to mirror Guigemar (282). The young man is beautiful, pure of spirit, and independent; he does not need the company of another creature to be happy, a sexual partner. When men become sexual, they become dependent on a woman for their pleasure. This idea arises from the Catholic notion that celibacy is the perfect state of man because “[f]ornication, in fact, is called a depravity even by those who are depraved themselves” (Augustine, *City* 578). Furthermore, it was thought that “[g]eneration in paradise would have occurred without the shame of lust” (Augustine, *City* 590). The Church, in the words

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of Augustine, accepted sex as a necessary abomination to procreate, so society celebrated and condemned it. The Church created a conflict within men to reject their natural instincts.

“Guigemar” explores the circumstances of a young man keeping and losing his virginity, exploring chastity from a woman’s perspective. The young knight has killed the virginal part of his life, and he is hurting.

De France develops some of the most provocative sensual rhymes to describe an inanimate magical object, the ship, as the personification of a woman. The personification unfolds in three parts: the body of a virginal young woman, her beautiful sexual cavity, and her mind, sailing by the power of her passion to fulfill her destiny. Guigemar is at the same moment the male sexual organ penetrating the vessel of his salvation and experiencing the pain of penetration. The beautifully built solitary ship, is “fit and ready to go, / calked outside and in, no...seams in its hull, made of solid ebony” (L.153-57). De France follows immediately with a reference to the possibility and beauty of the first female orgasm, as “[t]he sail was pure silk; / it would look beautiful when unfurled (L.159-60). The knight is experiencing feelings as both man and woman.

The lai has not introduced a female character as of yet, but de France is describing feelings and ideas from a feminine viewpoint. Although the event of entering the vessel is described as a sensual romantic experience, illustrated with textures, colors, and movement, and it is a man entering this beautiful and untouched body, it is the man who “...in great pain, boarded the ship,” alluding to the pain that some women experience when losing their virginity (L.166). As with the mythological hind, the suggestion of hermaphroditism or bisexuality cannot be ignored, as the occasion is traumatic, like, on occasion, the rupture of the hymen can be. The magical ship that sails without a crew takes him to the land of an aged man who has a “noble,

courteous, beautiful, intelligent” wife (L.212). This young wife displays initiative and confidence. She acts with ease, disrobing and proceeding to enter the craft (L.277-78). The lai presents thus another role reversal.

Although the story is about Guigemar, de France writes verse after verse to tell us all that the young woman does to rescue him. The lai describes how the lady and her maid take the knight from the ship to her apartment, which is inside a tower, where she is kept under strict vigilance. This is incongruous because she freely left the cell and came back carrying a man, introducing him into her chamber. Although towers were a standard architectural feature, the symbolism of the phallus and the vaginal cavity is not lost; this is her chamber after all. The author might have been familiar with Galen’s theory of the inverted sexual anatomy.

Male sexuality is central to the plot, and adultery is not censured. On the contrary, the love affair between the knight and the young woman is celebrated. She decides to care for Guigemar until he heals, fulfilling the curse imposed on him by the hind and allowing enough time to fall in love. The role reversal of his virginity is solidified by the woman’s few but certain conjugal obligations to her old husband. The lines about Guigemar approaching the ship and expecting “to discover men inside / guarding the vessel / but he saw no one” allude to her sexual dissatisfaction (L.167-69).

In fact, thirty lines are dedicated to describe the wife’s conditions of imprisonment and isolation, which include the decoration of the chamber: a painting of Venus throwing into the fire Ovid’s book, which instructs lovers on how to control their love (L.233-44). While the story is about his ordeal, de France takes great care to describe her pain. The reader must sympathize with his suffering, mentioned throughout the tale, but de France infiltrates the woman’s trials, provoking sympathy for her. The masculine voice carries the story through their physical union.

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In fact, falling in love is described as an aggressive event, almost regretful: “[b]ut now love struck him to the quick / great strife was in his heart / because the lady had wounded him so badly” (L.379-81). The masculine voice continues with a satisfied demeanor, describing the aftermath of the lovemaking, for “. . . Guigemar is at ease / They lie down together . . . / kissing and embracing often” (L.530-32). However, the next two lines are feminine and courteous: “I hope they also enjoy whatever else / others do on such occasions” (L.533-34). In what measure de France calculate the number of lines with which she slightly modified the story and to what extent the exercise was solely guided by the rhyme and her subconscious, we will not know, but the feminine presence is undeniable in the *lais*.

The feminine voice continues carrying the next seventy-two lines dedicated to the lovers’ anticipation of being discovered, facing the possibility of his future marriage, pledging unwavering love for each other, and devising an ingenious plan to stay faithful. This is a critical part of the plot and a romantic masculine display of clever scheming. Guigemar is bound to a woman who is already married by a knot on his shirt (L.559-65). He makes her “wear a belt next to her bare flesh /tightened about her flanks” (L.571-72). The hero is not killed by the husband but escorted back to the ship that brought him there—the vessel that resembled a virginal woman—in which he cries for her (L.618-22).

After two years of imprisonment, the young woman finds the door open one day and escapes aboard the magic ship, determined to kill herself, believing he died in it. Fortunately, magic prevents her from drowning herself, and she continues her trip to find him (L.659, 665, 674-78, 683). Although she commits adultery, she is strong, sensitive, courageous, and passionate, as opposed to sinful, lustful, evil, and dishonorable.

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Meriaduc, the lord of the land where the two lovers landed on separate occasions, reunites them after observing the belt on the woman and informing her of the knight trying to avoid marriage in a similar fashion (L.722-733). In an uncharacteristic display of reasonableness, Guigemar “[implores] . . . give her back to me out of kindness (L.481-82). De Frances makes emphasis on Guigemar’s reaction, and it is Meriaduc, who as a suitor, makes a challenge to “. . . defend her against [Guigemar]” (L.851.52). Although the second part of the story tells of a knight who found love in a beautiful young woman and, at the end, launches an army to get her back—typical of male-authored Romances—it is the most sensuous and complex depiction of his awakening to sexuality, enriched by the feminine experience—her pain, her joy, her beauty, her sorrow, and her sacrifice—that reveals de France’s masterful insertion of the feminine voice into a male text.

### **Equitan**

The second of the *lais* dedicates the first twelve lines to credit the Bretons, creating distance between the writer of the *lais* and the heavily prejudiced tone of the plot. The hero is a chauvinistic traitor of his own seneschal. He pursues the wife of his loyal vassal, sustains a long affair with her, abusing his higher position to keep the husband away, and tries to kill him. The wife, who does not have a name, is credited with planning the assassination of her husband and convincing the king to help her. Lust possesses the king when he meets her, but she does nothing to provoke this. The king is weak to the power of sin, not to her power, for she refuses his advances for some time. De France writes over fifty lines about the king’s rationalization of his libidinous intentions with this woman, over thirty lines explaining how a man of high rank can

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have any woman he wants, and almost thirty lines to the king's arguments to convince her to accept his love (L.58-176).

The offended husband—the seneschal—is a good man; the king is a perfidious man that agrees to kill his loyal subject. The twisted characterization of the wife is distinctive of masculine accounts of adulterous women and a symptom of the misogynistic atmosphere of the time. In fact, she is seduced by the king. The initiative is his, but the story turns the lower class woman into the sole villain. The king is made an example of how bad deeds have their punishment not of dishonorable behavior.

There is no mythological beast in this lai, and it ends in an admonitory tone (Hanning and Ferrante, *The Lais* 69). This is a case study for the convoluted idea of moral behavior, excusing violence and revenge, neglecting forgiveness and charity. In this case the adulterous affair is negatively portrayed, presented in contrast to other lais where the extramarital relationship is celebrated—e.g. “Guigemar.” The seneschal is given the opportunity of revenge, but his participation in the story is minimal. The tale is about the licentious encounters and their rightful punishment, but de France gives the seneschal's wife a speech to the king, declaring her position of disadvantage as the lover of the king. It is a feminist moment using feminine language when she says: “I'm sure you believe / your rank entitles you to my love / Love is worthless if it's not mutual” (L.135-37).

The masculine sexual language illustrates the lust of a man for a woman as the king plans secretive encounters, and begs for “possession of her body” (L.180). Love is a force that takes possession of the man's body in several of these stories, assaulting and wounding them. In this case, Love is a third character that renders the king defenseless (L.54-62). The power of love is

perceived by some men as a destructive force. In contrast, women tend to have a positive idea of this emotion. In this lai, de France provides Love with a proper name and a personality.

However, the lovers share tender moments and are seriously committed to one another. Forty-nine lines, in the middle of the poem, are reserved to describe the romantic interactions between the lovers “. . . [exchanging] rings / and [promising] themselves to each other” (L.181-82). Although this lai reprimands adultery assigning painful chastisement for the offenders, more than a third of the verses are devoted to the love affair. This shift in perspective or position by the writer is characteristic of the literature throughout the middle ages; Chaucer will use it extensively two hundred years later.

### **Lanval**

This is the most masculine of the lais, set in Arthur’s court, a full-fledged male sexual fantasy with a feminist approach. Lanval is a brave beautiful and generous knight, who, after his king has neglected to recognize his merit, is made whole by a rich woman, betrays her trust, is accused of homosexuality by the queen, is rescued by the young woman who loves him, and ends in Avalon, a land of fantasy.

Accepting a mysterious invitation, he finds a young woman “[laying] on a beautiful bed . . . dressed only in her shift / Her body was well shaped and elegant . . . [and] . . .her whole side was uncovered” (L.93-104). This attractive, almost naked, woman declares her love for Lanval, and he surrenders himself to the love that “. . .stung him with spark / that burned and set fire to this heart” (L.118-19, 108). The aggressive depiction of love is present again in this lai. She gives him a fortune, but forbids him from revealing her existence (L.140-45). They lie in bed until evening, and she is completely at his command, with the condition of his silence (L.153-

218). Before he leaves her company that night, two young women bring his horse, which he had left behind in the field for hours (L.919). At this point in the poem, the dreamlike experience can still be a reverie, and the reader will doubt again whether Lanval is fortunate or delusional.

Lanval continues to live in fantasy at his return to the lodging where he gives away gifts and releases prisoners. All this generosity is sponsored by the mysterious young woman (L.201-14). Enjoying his newly found fortune, he finds himself in great jeopardy by the sexual advances of another woman, King Arthur's wife. Rejected by the knight, the queen accuses him of finding sexual pleasure with ". . . fine-looking boys" (L.259-82). Lanval loses confidence and insults the queen. Trying to prove that he has a female sexual partner, Lanval discloses the existence of his generous lover, provoking the queen's anger and a false accusation of unrequited sexual advances (L.296-324). The knight has another moment of weakness when being alone, having realized his mistake, "he called on his lover, again and again" (L.333-39). This act can be perceived as longing for her, while in a woman, it can constitute weakness. Furthermore, he complains, sighs, faints, cries for her mercy, curses his heart and mouth, shouts, rants, and rages (L.341-48). This behavior in a woman is hysteria, but in a man it is frustration.

The mysterious woman risks her anonymity to rescue Lanval, and Lanval loses his ability to live in the "real" world, revealing that the woman is from the Fairy World. That is what happens when they go to Avalun, the mystical Otherworld in Celtic tradition, riding the same horse, with the woman riding in front (L.639-41). Emanuel Mickel explains, "[t]he Arthurian setting has long been considered Marie's personal invention, since the anonymous lai *Graelent*, which has essentially the same storyline, is not placed in Arthur's court" (83). De France romanticized the tale, giving it an extra touch of gallantry and chivalry by setting the story in the most legendary kingdom, but portrayed the young woman as the real knight in the story.

### **Yonec**

This lai is the best example of de France telling the feminine perspective in these Breton stories about men. “Yonec” features as title the name of the boy who appears in the last fifth of the lai (in line 457 of 554). Eighty percent of the poem is about his nameless mother. De France could have told the story in a different order, starting with the life of a boy who upon discovering that he is an orphan receives the assignment to avenge his father’s death: to kill the man he believed to be his biological father. Instead, de France writes verse after verse about the awful situation his mother endures, the proof of Christian devotion she demands from the magical knight, her lovely fragility, and her loss. This lai is rich in elaborate imagery, magical artifacts, surreal settings, honorable revenge, and a knight with magical powers; yet, more than ninety percent of the poem is dedicated to the woman whose adulterous affair procreates a son. Her extramarital activities generate the opportunity for vengeance and celebrate honor, religiosity, and romance. “Love, in other words, is not a sin” (Ferrante, “French Courtly Poet” 69). According to Hanning and Ferrante, the woman in this lai “. . . uses her imagination to create the love she needs. . . [T]he world can imprison the body but not the mind” (*The Lais* 152, 154).

Thirty lines at the beginning of this lai are dedicated to the misfortune of the young woman “who was given [as a wife] to the rich man” (L.21). The description of her prison-like accommodations and the details of the conjugal visits are accentuated with her sorrow, her weeping, and her loss of beauty (L.27-50). The strict watch over her and absolute isolation take away her will to live. Emanuel Mickel explains, “Marie takes great pains to outline the unfortunate circumstances under which the young woman was married and in which she must live” (112). To make sure it is not missed, de France uses this motif of the detrimental marital

arrangement later in the story as the source of her husband's suspicion in lines 225 through 241. Furthermore, Susan M. Johnson explains that the many interpretations of the story, based on biblical allusions, pay little attention to the terrible abuse Yonec's mother suffered at the hands of her husband (162-63). It was standard practice for husbands to confine the future mother of their children, guaranteeing her chastity, but Marie demonizes the husband's actions. More than a hundred lines describe the sorrows of the woman married to a cruel old man, justifying the adultery.

The poem touches on the issue of women's power of initiative, placing Eve at the center of this important matter by crediting Adam for the Fall and giving the young woman three distinct occasions to initiate important action. Although it is the knight who has magical powers to transform into a hawk, this happens at her invocation (L.95-134). De France sanctifies the magic by making the young woman ask the knight to take communion, thus proving his Christian faith (L.138-191). De France mentions, briefly but firmly, ". . . the grief / that Adam, our father, led us into / when he bit into the bitter apple" (L.151-52). The Bible is clear about Adam's accusation of his wife as the instigator of their joint disobedience and about God's wrath against Eve, chastising her more harshly than her husband—God condemned Adam to hard work, and Eve to help him besides give birth in pain (Gen. 3:11-19). De France also gives Yonec's mother a self-confident guilt free attitude towards sex, wanting ". . . to see her love all the time / and enjoy herself with him" (L.219-20). Although the language is masculine, the treatment of the subject is feminine, insinuating healthy libido—not wicked insatiability—when writing that she liked having ". . . him all to her pleasure" (L.222-23).

De France took the story of a well-respected knight, lord in his own land, who used magic to gain the love of a lovely young woman and procreate an heir who would avenge his

death, and she wrote the poem of the young woman who suffered through all this. Although the story is about Yonec's mother, it does not neglect to celebrate the love, devotion, and honor of his father. It is likely that not all men agreed with arrange marriages, having a need for sincere love and intelligent female company.

### **Eliduc**

This is the longest of the *lais* (1067 lines) and more complex than it appears. Eliduc addresses the role of God within the intricate interactions between a man and his wife, a man and his lover, and a man and his lord (Hanning and Ferrante, *The Lais* 229). The protagonist struggles making wrong decision throughout the story, trying to have everything: two women, two lords, and a secular and a spiritual life. Despite many errors, he manages to have it all, betraying some and hurting others. The story is about Eliduc, but “[i]n contrast to the hero's actions, the women never fail in their devotion” (232). In this *lai*, de France exchanges the gender-typical behavior and gives the woman the initiative to pursue the man.

De France creates a hero who goes against social and godly law, who lies to people and hurts their feelings, who abandons his wife for a better life, and who has a romantic relationship with another woman while married. Furthermore, Eliduc leaves his wife a second time to go abduct the young woman he is deceiving, and kills a man. And, to conclude on the same note, he pledges to become a monk when thinking the second woman is dead, neglecting his obligations to his wife, one more time. De France portrays a real man with flaws and qualities and prone to finding trouble (Hanning and Ferrante, *The Lais* 230). The author also designed two female characters with high moral standards and protects their integrity throughout the story. The wife is not technically betrayed, and the young woman is not a betrayer.

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Both women love Eliduc, and he loves them back. He marries Guildeluec first and Guilliadun second. As in *Lanval*, envy and slander motivates the king to send him away (L.44-46). Eliduc leaves to “. . .enjoy himself for a while . . . [leaving] his wife at home” (L.70-72). Very soon during this exile, he arrives at the land of a powerful man, who has a daughter of marriageable age (L.91-95). After he pledges his faith to this new lord and his army, his first act of command is to plan an ambush to attack the enemy before the battle. It is an effective strategic maneuver but not very honorable. (L.166-225). The endeavor is successful, and the king “. . . [keeps] him a whole year” (L.267). That is to say that the king asks him to stay in his service for a year, assuming that Eliduc is a man unattached to woman or lord.

When the king’s daughter hears good things about Eliduc, she summons “him to come visit her” (L.276-77). Even for today’s standards, this young woman is very forward, taking him by the hand to sit on her bed (L.297-98). However, the visit ends after only a long conversation, and immediately he regrets the time without knowing her. Only until this moment, he “[remembers] his wife / and how he had assured her / that he’d be faithful to her” (L.323-25). In contrast to this is unbecoming conduct of a knight, *de France* gives the woman initiative and determination; she gives her the prerogative of wanting “. . . to make him her lover” (L.328). The author uses masculine language, but gives the female character self-confidence and a healthy feminine attitude about sex as she did in “*Yonec*.” Per design, the young woman assumes the role of the chivalric knight desiring desperately to conquer his love, confessing to her chamberlain her feelings and intentions to do anything for him.

As part of her plan to gain the affections of Eliduc, the lord’s daughter decides to send him two gifts: a gold ring and a belt (L.329-49). *Guigemar* also gave a belt to the woman he loved (L.569-70). *De France* stretches the role reversal and describes her in anguish waiting for

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his answer, pondering on the fact that she ignores his social position (L.381-89).

Characteristically, women are concerned with this issue for it pertains to security and stability. She simultaneously assumes male and female attitudes as she actively pursues him and worries about his social position. After a few lines describing her emotional agony over his possible negative response, the anticipation of the reader builds as her chamberlain rushes to present the gifts to Eliduc (L.390-414). She is left without an answer or a gift in exchange, confused and disappointed (L.421-48). De France is reversing the roles.

However, the young woman does not become Eliduc's lover; they engaged in a platonic relationship (L.519-42). De France writes this character, Guilliadun, to be an enthusiastic, but proper, young woman. In contrast, although Eliduc does not have sex with another woman, he is unfaithful in his heart. His conduct is reproachable while the two women are examples of respectability. It is also unbecoming of a knight to continue keeping his marriage a secret after he announces his return to his original king, pledging to come back if required by the second lord (L.619-42). Moreover, he gives her a false reason for not taking her with him: he cannot betray his faith to her father (L.685-89).

Back in his land of origin, everyone, including his wife, receives him with joy, but he is unhappy (L.705-16). His behavior towards his wife is more than unfair. He is cruel, keeping her feeling worried for his sorrow, and finally deciding to go back to Guilliadun (L.749-62). Continuing with this dishonorable conduct, he abducts the young woman. And, during the trip back aboard a ship, a storm breaks threatening their lives (L.763-829). The sailors believe that the storm is punishment for Eliduc's misconduct. The crew demands that he throws the woman into the sea to stop God's wrath for his unfaithfulness (L.830-840). It is now disclosed that he kept his marital status a secret, hurting two women who love him (L.851-52). At this moment,

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Eliduc offends God again by killing the sailor he believes caused the death of the young woman on the ship when he disclosed the truth (L.859-65). Eliduc avoids responsibility, assigns blame, and executes punishment. Furthermore, in despair, he neglects to make sure she is dead and starts planning her burial (L.885-914). However, an unfortunate event delays her entombment saving her life (L.915-934). Adding insult to the grief caused to his wife, Eliduc promises Guilliadum—the supposedly dead woman—to become a monk, forgetting about his marital obligations (L.947-48).

Worried about Eliduc's gloomy demeanor, his wife has him followed. She is informed that Eliduc displays great grief at the hermitage, crying for someone (L.979-1005). Guideluec, the wife, discovers the young woman inside the building. In her generosity, Guideluec saddens at the sight of the dead young woman. While distressed, a weasel comes running and her valet kills it with a stick (L.1010-36). De France uses a magical artifact, a red rose, to have a male weasel revive his mate, and in the same way, Guideluec revives Guilliadun (L.1038-65). Contradicting the prescribed idea of women fighting hysterically over a man, the wife consoles the young woman, and they converse like friends about Guideluec's decision to "take the veil" (L.1070-1102). Eliduc returns at the request of his wife, who informs him of the events, and he reconciles with Guilliadun, displaying affection towards her in the presence of his wife (L.1113-19). Instead of a tragic ending, the woman who married him gives him up for the convent and the woman who he deceived, marries him (L.1120-1144). The newlyweds live in harmony for a short time, and in gratitude, Eliduc decides to found a church to reside in after placing his new wife in the same convent with his first wife (L.1145-1170).

**The New Face of Literature after *The Lais of Marie de France***

Marie de France touched the words spoken by men, the construction of the scenes and the atmosphere created by them, and the literature in its entirety, permanently. She wrote narrative poetry—octosyllabic couplets—from masculine oral literature—the Breton stories, feminized them and gave them to the world. Rosenn explains, “[w]hile her (often nameless) [female] characters must be silent, Marie tells their stories” (226). De France speaks through the silent women. Stein claims, “Marie’s struggle was to achieve, among other things, a persona that was relevant—empowered through speech” (228). De France uses literature to control her world like the woman in “Yonec” who creates her intimate fantastic reality inside her tower. The author was concerned “with the inner life of the emotions and the mind . . . caused by her frustration as a intelligent and gifted woman with few outlets for her skill in the secular world . . .” (Ferrante “French Courtly Poet” 67). Lay and religious women were trained for specific tasks; in contrast, men were educated. A few women could write, but men were writers. Peasant women and ladies alike were considered incapable of an intellectual life. What Marie de France was doing was revolutionary; she became a writer.

As much as she made literature of the Breton tales, she wrote narrative poetry about the women in these stories. De France kept the male protagonists and the nameless women, but emphasized the male’s natural personality flaws, creating heroes who are realistic. In this aspect, de France is slightly veering of the path of chivalric tradition, producing characters closer to the sympathies of the reader, men and women. Unlike fairy tales, the *lais* do not always have a happy ending, but a lesson to be learned. Despite the magic, the surrealism, and the supernatural creatures and events in the *lais*, these are stories about people, realistically imperfect people: Guigemar’s lack of humility, Equitan’s betrayal of his seneschal, Lanval’s moment of weakness

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which cost him a fully realized existence as he follows his lover into the Otherworld, Muldumarec's (Yonec's father) adulterous affair and inheritance of hate and revenge for his son, and Eliduc's double life. *The Lais of Marie de France* are the earliest occurrence of a feminist literary approach to a text, a masculine literature that she feminized while trying to preserve it. The pen of a woman had successfully written literature, men's literature.

## CHAPTER THREE

### III. Marguerite Porete: Mirror of God

#### Introduction

Marguerite Porete wrote a theological treatise, in vernacular Old French, to guide the human soul through its transformation into the mirror of God. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* explores the process by which God can be reached without the intervention of either persons or institutions during this life. Canon lawyers declared several of the articles in the text heretical, and the day before Porete's execution, she was forced to witness the burning of her book (Bryant 204-05). On the first day of June 1310, Marguerite Porete, a Beguine referred to as *pseudo-mulier*, was publicly burned alive as a relapsed heretic "for refusing to desist in disseminating the ideas in [her] book to the learned and the simple" (Bussey 8). Having been granted approval for the book by high clergy, Porete expired without retracting her beliefs, or implicating others, ensuring that no one else associated with the text would be harmed.

*The Mirror of Simple Souls* marks the next step in the redefinition of woman as equal to men spiritually, and intellectually. Porete builds upon the legacy of de France, venturing into theological studies, writing it entirely in feminine voice, implying its availability to the male soul, and obtaining endorsement for the text. This completely original work departs from traditional Christian doctrine and from the convention of the genre by not using Socrates as foundation like Augustine and Aquinas. The book successfully expounds complex and provocative ideas.

The analysis in this chapter is chronological, but organized by topic because Porete uses repetition and sequential development of ideas. The study examines Porete's selection of genre, style, language, and rhetorical devices and focuses on concepts that depart from Christian

doctrine: reducing the commandments, abandonment of virtue and will, a life without sin, the unnecessary celebration of the sacrament of Eucharist, a paradise on Earth, and Mary's life as a widow. The analysis follows the development of Porete's method identifying the rhetorical devices. Porete states, at the beginning of *The Mirror*, her deliberate use of ambiguity, explaining this with ambiguity—as de France did in her time (*Mirror* 79; *Lais* “Prologue” L.9-27). Porete asserts her authority by her claim that the book was dictated by Love and by her call for humility in the Explicit that opens the book. She helps her readers accept her words using tone, diction, and a variety of genres. The literature review consists of *Republic* by Socrates, Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, Augustine's *City of God*, and *Summa Theologica* by Thomas of Aquinas. The analysis of syntax is based on a translation, thus sentence type and length take precedence over scheme and punctuation.

The full title of her book, which was not named in her trial, is *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls Who Are Annihilated and Remain Only in Will and Desire of Love*, “. . . which is essentially Porete's voice and the only sympathetic indication we have of her life and ideas . . .” (Bussey 3). Porete proposes that God creates the human being as soul, housed in a human body, and that this soul can become the reflection of God by ridding itself of all material elements of existence, and living in love and charity.

### **Biographical Evidence**

Marguerite Porete was from a region south of Flanders and Brabant called Hainaut, France, so she was also referred to as Marguerite de Hannonia; the rest of her story is extracted from the documentation made of her trial and from her book (Bryant 204). The documents relating to her condemnation lack biographical information and can be considered hostile

accounts. These documents are the “*Nangis Chronicles* (composed by an anonymous monk of the notoriously conservative Royal Abbey of St. Denis), the *Frachet Chronicles* (shorter reiterative version of Nangis’ text), the *Grand Chronicles of France*, and a brief extract in Jean d’Outremeuse’s c.1400 *Ly Meur [sic] des Histoires*” (Bussey 6).

The analysis of *The Mirror* leaves no doubt that she had profound knowledge of theology, philosophy, and psychology, and that she was fluent in Latin. However, she wrote most of the text in Old French, making it available to laymen. Marguerite Porete was devoted to God and to a life of study, charity, and humility. Proof of this is her work: the manuscript of the text and the distribution of copies—including translations. The scant evidence that remains suggests that she was utterly devoted to her ideal of uniting with God.

Porete’s demeanor at her trial demonstrated her commitment to her belief that “humility is the mother of all virtues” (Porete 79). Father Lord Guy, bishop of Cambrai, forbid her by letter to propagate by word or writing the content of her book, but the Inquisition found that she proceeded to send the book to other important clergy. During the trial though, she declined to take the religious oath that would have allowed the inquisitor to force testimony out of her (Babinsky 23). Porete’s silence during the long Inquisition process is an indication of her respect for the institution and served to protect anyone associated with the text. She endured interrogation sessions during the extended imprisonment imposed on her by William of Paris, but remained unwilling to recant.

She believed that God gave her the understanding and the ability to compose the book and disseminate its material. Marie de France made a similar statement about exercising and sharing her knowledge and her writings. De France states in her Prologue: “[w]hoever has

received knowledge / and eloquence in speech from God / should ... demonstrate it willingly” (L.1-4).

### **Historical Context**

Many events had been shaping the moment in which Marguerite Porete would write her book. In the years between *The Lais* and *The Mirror*, the world suffered the rest of the Crusades, Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1285), a Beguine and a Cistercian, wrote her visions in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*; St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) produced *Summa Theologica*; the only king to be canonized, Louis IX, ruled France from 1226 to 1270; the Inquisition, which started in France during the 12<sup>th</sup> c., lasted into the 14<sup>th</sup> c.; and universities—exclusively for men—began to be founded in Italy, England, Spain, and France.

Almost two hundred years of Crusades left Europe with many widows, unwed maidens, and an exalted spirituality overall. Many men probably preferred the priesthood to the battlefield, and women also found a sort of safety in a life dedicated to the Church. However, during this time (12<sup>th</sup> c.), convents and monasteries restricted the number of members admitted into their congregations, and within the next few years the Church prohibited any new orders from being founded (*The Fourth Lateran Council 1215 Const. 13*).

The circumstances offered women a degree of access to intellectual occupations within the safety of a quiet spiritual life, one that was not always officially sponsored by the Church. During the last two decades of the twelfth century—Marguerite was in her twenties or thirties—“middle class women across Belgium, the Netherlands, northern France and Germany began to establish Christian households where women could pursue a life of spiritual growth” (Myers 21). Women with means brought their money and poorer single women contributed their labor to

form communities and built clusters of townhomes bordered by walls, having the opportunity to evangelize the townspeople living around them and inviting other women to join them (84-86). Beguines had a positive impact in the community, a purpose, and did not upset social order, so they multiplied throughout Europe.

### **The Beguines**

Before Porete's time, some of these groups found support in important people like Jacques de Vitry, who in 1216 obtained verbal permission from Pope Honorius III for these devout women to live together (Babinsky 6). De Vitry and Robert Sorbon saw Beguines and Papehardes—their male counterparts—as highly pious, even though being despised and mocked by William of St. Amour, their colleague, “for displaying their feigned poverty and imposing their Pharisee values on everyone” (Grundmann 164). Some of these groups functioned under the pastoral care of the mendicant orders, living in scarcity and abstinence imitating Christ (Bryant 205).

Gautier of Coincy, another important member of the clergy, also expressed great disdain for the religious poverty movement and associated their practices with the Amaurians, who were a group accused of heresy (Grundmann 159-61). The religious poverty movement was unstable, but some groups of Beguines and Papehardes found sponsorship in the Church as well as in the Crown. The heirs of the late king Louis IX, who died forty years before Porete, continued to fund the Beguines that he supported while alive (Babinsky 13-14).

The Beguines' commitment to God and austerity was an essential part of their belief system, so those who did not find institutional patronage lived from the charity of private supporters, their families' funding, or their own income. Some in this situation lived in isolation

and some associated in semi-informal groups. Marguerite Porete was called a Beguine during the second deliberation against her on 9 May 1310, but she expresses reservations about possible disapproval from Beguines in two lines of a poem in Chapter 122 of her book (200). The formation of Beguine communities was a religious movement that started before Marguerite Porete and continued after her death.

### Ascertaining Her Authority

Porete establishes the superior position of the text over ecclesiastical authority in her opening poem, which praises faith and love, giving the possibility of understanding it to any person, educated or not, as long as they possess humility (79). The poem also explains to “theologians and other clerks” that they will not have the intellect to comprehend its content without humility, and that Love and Faith will rise above Reason (79). The author’s use of a diversity of literary forms and genres and her choice of language reaches the hearts and souls of common folk. Her book can be understood without advanced learning, but it does not exclude the learned people. Porete wrote most of *The Mirror* in Old French and a small portion—at the end—in Latin.

The narrator enters into dialogue with several interlocutors, allegorical personifications of *Love*, *Reason*, and *Soul*, engaged in a device called direct discourse (Lerner 1). Some other speakers are: *Truth*, *Temptation*, *Faith*, *Hope*, *Charity*, *Holy Spirit*, *Holy Church*, *Intellect of Divine Light*, *Those who have something to hide*, *Unencumbered Soul*, *The Supreme Lady of Peace*, *Intellect*, *Annihilated Soul*, and *Understanding by Divine Light*. Porete resorts to descriptive names as the explanations become more detailed, avoiding a lecturing tone.

**Tone**

The tone is mostly serene, demure, maternal, overall instructive but passionate and seductive at times. It varies according to speaker, literary form, and moment in the text or topic, but the voice is feminine throughout.

The use of maternal expressions such as “for you little ones of the Holy Church” has a comforting effect, not admonitory (81). Porete accuses without accusation; her defense of the Magdalene is stern and reproofing, but not aggressive. Porete states, “[s]he had dishonor from no one, except those by whom she had been condemned” (150). The tone at times is energetic as in this passage: “[t]hen I responded quickly that I was Pure Nothingness. Alas, what would I will? (215). The dialogue often turns into short monologues to explain ideas, mimicking thinking out loud, making Porete’s use of discourse lively. The format is Augustinian, but it does not address matters of the flesh like his *City of God* and Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, which discuss the place of women in the structure of life in terms of her defective anatomy. Porete discusses abstract concepts such as free will, true charity, and the nothingness of the soul. *The Mirror* does not address negative human behavior and punishment; it focuses on the process to achieve the next state of piety. Porete opens with a courtly-love anecdote, which includes romantic and erotic elements, engaging the interest of readers from every cultural level.

**Diction**

The main topics are discussed in stages, using repetition, and some chapters address more than one topic, disregarding any differences with Catholic doctrine. Avoiding explanation of these divergences allows the readers to make their own inferences and interpretations. Porete’s

use of repetition is effective, producing a rhythm in the prose that helps the reader go back, mentally, to parts in the text where the ideas were previously discussed.

Porete allocates gender to the personification of the speakers; *God* and *Holy Spirit* are masculine, and *Soul*, *Love*, and *Reason* are feminine—Christine de Pizan will use a feminine personification of Reason in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, a little more than a century later. Although God all mighty is a masculine personification, the text is dictated by *Love*, feminine, to another feminine personification, the *Soul*. Porete makes feminine entities the beginning and the end of the method.

### **The Transformation of the Soul**

Porete's spiritual progress of the soul toward the union with God involves three phases: death to sin, death to nature, and death to the spirit. The death to mortal sin occurs during the first stage when the soul submits to God's commandments. The death to nature happens in the second stage when the creature abandons will to mortify its nature, despising riches, delight, and honors. The death of nature gives birth to the spiritual life, which dies at the abandonment of will and transitions into the life of the divine (139-41).

According to *The Mirror*, there are two kinds of souls: the lost and the sad. The lost souls "completely mortify the body in doing works of charity. . . . [T]hey are lost in their works, on account of the sufficiency which they have in their being" (132). The sad souls remain in desire and will—doing works of charity—acting as servants and merchants. The sad souls are wiser than the lost souls, for they believe in a better being than themselves—God—and understand that they lack understanding of this better being (133-34). Porete elaborates on the complex psychological analysis of the nature of the soul, distinguishing between ability, intellect, and

understanding (Babinsky 31).

*The Mirror* recapitulates the seven stages of the soul in chapter 118, and these are: 1) the soul abandons sin by keeping the commandments; 2) God counsels His special friends “to go beyond what He commands”; 3) the soul obeys another will, abstaining from work and from will, fulfilling another will to destroy her own—all this happens while the soul’s spirit is “. . . sharpened through a boiling desire of love . . .”; 4) “the Soul is drawn . . . into the delight of thought through meditation”; 5) “. . . the Soul considers that God is Who is, from whom all things are, and she is not if she is not of Him . . .”; 6) “. . . the Soul does not see herself on account of such an abyss of humility which she has within her”; 7) Love keeps this stage “. . . to give to us in eternal glory . . .”; (193-94). This happens while the soul resides in a living human body, from the abandonment of sin to attaining glory. According to Christian teachings humans commit sins until death. This is a fundamental disagreement between Porete’s thesis and the system of values of the Catholic Church.

### **The Only Two Commandments**

In Chapter 3, Porete sets forth the commandments to achieve the perfection of the soul. Without explaining the reduction made of the Ten Commandments, Love simplifies them into two. These two commandments of the Holy Church are: 1) love God truly and speak only the truth; and 2) “neither do, nor think, nor speak toward our neighbors anything we would not wish they do toward us” (81-82). This short chapter uses the example of Jesus instructing to give all material things to the poor and follow him to find perfection (Matt. 19:21). This abridgement of the Decalogue allows for three significant differences: it is not directed specifically to men, it does not address matters of the flesh or property, and it does not prohibit anything. These two

commandments focus on achieving perfect union with God. By not addressing denigrating and destructive acts, Porete elevates the human condition to an entity that could become the object of the reflection of God in this life. The tone is conversational and demure but the instructions are stern and clear: “[t]hese commands are of necessity for salvation for all; nobody can have grace with a lesser way” (81).

### **Abandonment of Virtue**

Because virtue pertains to the body, Porete urges readers to abandon the practice of these and live in charity and love. Virtues are the positive side of sin, which is also physical. Restraint of thought and sensorial expression is indispensable to achieve virtuosity. Virtuosity is absolute; it is not possible to be a little chaste or a little humble; if one has a little patience, then one is not patient enough, and the same is for temperance, charity, diligence, and kindness. Painful mental and physical control is necessary to tame an emotion, a feeling, or an urge or to create a state of mind and/or a state of being, for the mind is also a physical entity.

Porete describes a soul that “is saved by faith without works . . . is only in love . . . does nothing for God . . . leaves nothing to do for God . . . [is someone] to whom nothing can be taught . . . from whom nothing can be taken nor give and who possesses no will” (82-83). These qualities of the soul translate into a life of worshiping God intimately and accountable to no one on earth, doing nothing for the Church. *The Mirror* issues no detailed restrictions such as chastity or temperance; instead, it stresses charity and humility and assumes patience and kindness.

Porete uses strong words in a song to say goodbye to Virtues explaining how having been “a slave to . . . [them] . . . [she] lived . . . in great distress” (84). And the tone escalates when describing the “wars against vices . . . in acquiring virtues . . . [calling this] a strenuous life

sickness and a life of war” (123-24).

### **Abandonment of Will**

According to the Bible, humanity has free will to follow God’s mandate or not, subject to penalty (John 1:12-13). For Porete, the soul abandons will to accept only God’s will (86-97). Porete explains, “[h]ow those who have no more will live in freeness of charity” (124-25). She stresses the complexity of this concept by having God explain: “I will do my work in her without her. . . . for nothing is lacking to her since she wills nothing” (125). Porete expounds on this idea further, explaining “[h]ow the Soul has arrived at understanding of her nothingness. . . . [h]ow the Soul is not free who desires that the will of God be done in her to her honor. . . . [and] . . . [h]ow such a Soul, who no longer has will, is noble” (126-27). These ideas challenge Christian doctrine, based on biblical interpretation, which states that after the fall of man, he will toil and struggle all his life to master virtue, hoping to be granted life in “the new earth” on judgment day (Gen. 3:14-19; Rev 20:11-15; 21:1-8). Porete revisits this topic in an explanation that turns from a monologue, directed at the reader, into a conversation with herself. In addition, she uses the term vengeance, which at the time was associated with honor and sacrifice. Porete makes an exquisite reaffirmation of God’s omnipotence when the *Soul* says: “. . . if it could be that I might return to nothingness, so that He would be avenged of me, if this would please Him, it would be my pleasure” (212).

### **A Life without Sin**

Porete reiterates the nine characteristics of the soul in Chapter 11 elaborating on the last: the “Soul knows . . . the root of all evil. . . . And sin is nothing. This Soul is completely submerged and tormented by these horrible faults of hers, which are less than nothing, and by

means of this intellect this Soul is less than nothing, as long as she is with herself” (88-89). In other words, when the soul is in sin and not with God, the soul is nothing, just as sin is nothing. For Porete, sin is beneath the soul, and there is no chastisement worse than living in this dreadful state. In the eyes of the Church, human beings live a life of mistakes and sin, struggling to attain virtue until death when they face judgment and be sent to Heaven or Hell (Rev. 20:11-15).

In the Prologue Porete states, “Soul, touched by God and removed from sin at the first stage of grace, is carried by divine graces to the seventh stage of grace, in which state the Soul possesses the fullness of her perfection through divine fruition in the land of life” (80). In opposition to Church teachings, Porete claims that human beings—souls housed in human bodies—can live in a state of grace in which the absolute abandonment of will—allowing only the will of God to act upon us—gives us a life without sin. Her theory directs human beings to stop practicing acts of virtue.

Having failed to extract any testimony from Porete, during the year and a half of imprisonment, the Dominican Inquisitor extracted several articles from the book and submitted them, out of context, to the theological regents of the University of Paris (Petroff 281). This was one of at least fifteen articles that the canon lawyers unanimously declared heretical on April 11, 1310 (Bryant 205).

### **The Humanity of Jesus**

Using *Truth* as speaker, Porete talks about the “Sacrament of the Altar,” the Eucharist. This is the ritual of symbolically accepting the body and blood of the Christ by eating bread and drinking wine. Porete states that the embodiment of Christ is no longer here for us to see, and the glorification of his humanity is only understood by our intellect, making such displays of faith

unnecessary since intellect—reason—is less than humility and love. The author credits the divine Trinity for ordaining the Holy Sacrament of the Altar to feed, nourish, and sustain the Holy Church (97-98).

In Chapter 126, discussing the fourth consideration about the Virgin Mary, Porete creates a passionate, sensual tone to present a Christ “crucified . . . completely naked before her face” (206-07). The word naked makes his body real, carnal, and the thought of blood and wounded flesh and spirit comes to mind, but Porete avoids describing the gore of death by crucifixion. While the Church makes emphasis of the brutal physical punishment that Christ endured to save mankind, Porete directs attention to the fragility of the human body—an unimportant material/physical component of the soul. She emphasizes the suffering of the mother who saw the humility of her son’s inert naked body at the cross. For Porete, the human body should not be subjected to restraint or abstinence from experiencing pleasure; the soul should leave aside the corporeal experience and live in love and charity.

### **Earthly Life**

*The Supreme Lady of Peace*—a speaker—explains “[h]ow paradise is nothing other than to see God” (171). This moment is pivotal in the process of the transformation of the soul and proposes that the human soul can find Paradise on earth, a place on earth where only God and soul exist. For Porete, God and only God is whom the soul will want to see in Paradise, for all terrestrial love dissipates there.

According to Porete, the soul will exist in her body abandoning virtue and living in love—guided by Love, which is above Reason (Porete 79). The process of becoming the mirror of God happens in this life. Life is a moment in time where the soul is—we humans are—a

potential living object of the reflection of God. The plan directs the steps of the soul to see God and does not contemplate punishment for failure; it never mentions physical death, unlike the Christian model in which the end of human life is the portal to Heaven or Hell. In Porete's plan people will not need an authority that punishes them for not following the rules; there will be no judgment; and Paradise occurs in this life. *The Mirror* does not brand the clergy obsolete, but it annuls the role of control it plays.

### **The Disassociation from the Beguines**

Porete uses poetry to reiterate ideas insistently inviting reflection. Chapter 120 is a poem, "How Truth Praises such Souls," in which *Truth* praises the soul, who responds with absolute humility (195). Porete validates the soul further with the next poem, in which the *Holy Church* praises the soul and the *Holy Trinity* prays for her (196-97). *Soul* sings a song in chapter 122 that recounts the act of chastising herself: "[s]uch a beast I was / in the time that I served them" (L.1-2). Porete reiterates her concerns, adding several possible disapproving religious groups to her list such as Augustinians and Carmelites, expressing special concern about "what will beguines say (L.80-81). She adds a powerful statement that illustrates the controversy she had provoked. She states, "Beguines say I err" (L.84). At the end of the song, the soul claims, "'and by this am I impregnated / This is the divine seed and Loyal Love'" (L.124-25).

Porete disassociates from the Beguines by stating their disapproval and grouping them with other established religious organizations (198-201). The statement is important for two reasons because the Beguines were informal groups or individuals that were considered a threat to the Church, and Porete was called a Beguine during her trial.

**The Face of Mary**

Chapters 123 through 130 are dedicated to what Porete calls *Considerations* about different important religious people such as the apostles and the Son of God. Two of these people—only two—are women: the Magdalene and the Virgin Mary. The first *Consideration* uses the Magdalene’s name in the title and briefly talks about “what service she accomplished for the arrival of her guest Jesus Christ, who was often in the hospitality of Mary. . . . But she did this for the sake of nothingness . . .” (202-03). For Porete, the Magdalene was fulfilling one of the steps to become the reflection of God, being in nothingness.

Porete then goes on to tell us “how [Mary] cultivated the earth of her Lord which He had left to her” (202-03). The tone is anecdotal and passionate while telling about Mary’s life after her son died, laboring the land. Porete writes quotidian vivid imagery, humanizing Mary like no other author had ever done. This passage mixes reality with metaphor. In it, Mary is cultivating the earth, and she is the land in which God cultivates the seed of his love. The intense imagery goes from her pain to her pleasure in the same sentence, as the man physically “tills and plows and hoes this earth . . . to harvest the wheat which he must sow in it” (203).

The sensuality of these lines dignifies all mothers, who, regardless of the method of conception, give birth and nurture their children with their bodies, like the earth. Porete links a sensitive subject, motherhood, to the abandonment of virtues by describing how “[t]he earth which Mary worked was her body, which she punished through excesses and marvelous operations of ardent desires” (204). The author glorifies thus the physical work mothers and women do, attributing it to the one woman above the vulgarity of the human existence.

In the New Testament, Matthew explains how “[w]hen . . . Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the power of the Holy Spirit

(1:18). According to this account, Joseph had “decided to divorce her quietly” (1:19). However, “the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said to [Joseph]. . . . ‘It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child’” (1:20). Two verses later, the divine conception of Jesus is reaffirmed as Matthew states: “[t]he virgin shall be with child . . .” (1:23). The Bible does not include stories about Jesus until he is a grown man. Mary reappears when he is crucified. She walks with her son through his torment and to his death, in silence and acceptance. Porete pairs the word *punishment* with *ardent desires* to describe the life of Christianity’s most sublime woman.

Porete tells the reader about the life of Mary after the death of Jesus and her commitment to continue doing good works for her Lord. *The Mirror* describes how “[Mary] made these [ardent] desires flow through her [*earth*], tilling it though [sic] works of goodness, by which she worked the earth of herself in all that she knew would be valuable for her earth, in order to yield the true seed of God’s grace” (204). For Porete, Mary’s ardent desires are the natural manifestation of her need to create and nurture life. Porete’s choice of words purifies sexuality. Church tradition and doctrine took away Mary’s humanity, elevating her closer to God, but Porete celebrates her human capacity for physical manifestations of passion as long as these are for God. Mary’s ardent desires are physical, whether for the spiritual or for the corporeal. The only element not present in her experience is the man. It seems that the presence of the human husband is the factor that makes the event tainted and vulgar. The virgin can let these ardent desires flow through her body if she is with God alone.

The second section talks about Mary’s virginity, stating: “. . . that if the whole world were to be saved by her mediation in return for her withdrawing from her status of virginity, she would never consent to it in one sole thought, since Jesus Christ could accomplish saving the

world by His goodness through the mediation of His death” (207). In other words, humanity will be saved by Jesus, not by Mary. According to Catholic tradition, Mary remained a virgin all her life and stayed close to her son until his death, without mention of Joseph. Porete is an advocate of Mary’s virginity and solitude. Imagining Mary living off the land that her Lord left her must have been comforting for Porete, for life without a man in those days was very difficult; this was the kind of life the Beguines led.

### **Rhetorical Analysis**

The reader instinctively tries to make sense of Porete’s words because they speak of happiness and salvation, motivating them to comprehend the message. Porete employs a rhetorical device used by de France: writing with obscurity to promote the personal interpretation of the meaning by the reader (Prologue L.11-16).

This theological tract about the union with God through love is enriched with metaphor, imagery, vivid dialogue, a touch of courtly and erotic love married to sanctity, poems, songs, and rhythmic prose that resembles prayer. Porete discusses revolutionary ideas about a God who created love to guide the souls through their transformation into the reflection of him. And she speaks of another life, the life of peace of charity, but not about a physical death. The book does not cite sources, for it was dictated by Love—a feminine speaker and guide in the journey to see God—to another feminine entity, the Soul. Porete lived her philosophy as a soul that rid herself of all materiality, morality, and intellect, keeping only love and faith, having only God’s will and worrying not about virtue (Porete 79). For Porete, the relationship with God is intimate, thus individual.

Porete's contribution is a new way of seeing life on earth capable of transforming humanity. Francesca Caroline Bussey argues:

Porete was a productive participator in religious reform, whose impulse was to transform the individual, not the institution, and who articulated this by means of a discourse that moved across communities and the boundaries of gender and genre, but nevertheless, held firm to the tradition of a shared community of religious expression. (17)

Throughout the text, and especially at the end, Porete takes a prayer-like tone, asserting herself as a Christian who keeps the rules, reiterating the nothingness of the soul, and crediting nature for her destiny. She ends the book with a poem—or prayer—to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary. The repetition of ideas and terms allows the reader to search and find a personal understanding of them. The last chapter is a sort of afterword, crediting the three religious men who granted their approval for the text.

The free interpretation of the text is inherent to Porete's philosophy. The individual journey of the soul guided only by love is a private endeavor. The soul has no ties to anyone but God. The method in *The Mirror* excludes the institutional assistance of the Church. No human being interprets God's message for someone else. The deliberate ambiguity of the text provides the appropriate scenario for the soul's intimate study of the way to see God.

### **Extant Copies of the Text**

The text in original Old French and several translations preserved are testimony of the large and lasting impact Porete's words made. According to Ellen L. Babinsky, it is possible that thirty-six copies were circulating in Italy in the fifteenth century. Three manuscript copies of the

book, in Old French, from the late fifteenth century are owned by a nunnery at Orleans and preserved at Musee Conde, Chantilly, but only one of the manuscripts, edited by Romana Guarnieri, is accessible. All known medieval translations are accessible: four in Latin—three at the Vatican Library and one fragment at the Bodleian Library, in England; three manuscripts in Italian are preserved—one in Florence and the other two manuscript copies in Naples, Vienna, and Budapest (14<sup>th</sup> c.); three manuscripts in Middle English are preserved at the British Museum and the Bodleian Library (Babinsky 234). This is a total of thirteen manuscript copies: ten of them translations, all from that period, and three—in Latin—kept at the Vatican Library. This text was valuable to many important people who preserved it despite the Church's condemnation of it as heretical and the attempt to destroy it. Porete's notion of life is revolutionary, and her deliver strategy—although costly—proves to have been effective.

### **Literary Context**

According to Romana Guarnieri, who identified Marguerite Porete as the author of *The Mirror* when she announced her discovery of an Old French manuscript of the text, the same ideas and phrases are found in the works of seven other medieval women writers: Beatrijs of Nazareth, Marie d'Oignies, Christina Mirabilis, Ivetta of Huy, Juliana of Mont Cornillon, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Hadewijch of Antwerp (Petroff 281). Porete materialized in her book notions that she shared with these authors. Although Porete's date of birth is unknown, she could have been a few years younger than all these other writers, but still their contemporary.

After her first arrest, Porete sent her book for review and approval to three noted religious authorities: John of Quaregnon, a Franciscan, Dom Franco, a Cistercian from the Abbey of Villes, and a highly respected doctor of the University of Paris, Godfrey of Fontaines. Doctor

Fontaines was careful to indicate in his analysis that *The Mirror* is a difficult text to understand and a delicate method to undertake, advising Porete to be judicious in the distribution of it to “only people with a strong and fearless spirit” (Babinsky 22-23). Bussey states:

Officially, this refusal to cease and desist classified her as a relapsed heretic, a transgression that was magnified by her *contumacious* silence in the face of her inquisitors. These crimes—crimes that began with what was written and ended with what was not said—have given Porete the dubious distinction of being the first medieval woman writer burned for heresy. (2)

Although a copy of her book was burned to hurt her sensibility or break her spirit, the text was preserved. She set precedent for two important revelations: there is a line that women writers cannot cross and women must write. The writer dies; the written word persists.

### **Another Consequence of *The Mirror***

Pope Honorius III allowed the formation of the Beguine communities during his term (1216-1227), but seventeen popes later, Pope Clemente V (1305-1314) needed a way to control the religious movements without relegating them to an established order or creating a new order for them. He opted for prohibiting their association on the grounds that they “became adherents of the heresy of the Free Spirit” (Babinsky 11). The pope seemed oblivious to the lack of options women had (or knew very well their limited options), and he made the situation worse by repudiating them. At the Council of Vienne 1311-1312 (a year after Porete’s death), Clemente V issued a decree in which he called the Beguines and the Beghards an “abominable sect of wicked men and faithless women” (Church Council Decree 28). The document attaches eight reproachable beliefs adjudicated to these groups: 1) a person in this present life can acquire a

degree of perfection; 2) it is not necessary to fast or pray after gaining this degree of perfection; 3) those who have reached the said degree of perfection and spirit of liberty, are not subject to human obedience nor obliged to any commandments of the church; 4) a person can gain in this life final beatitude in every degree of perfection that he will obtain in the life of the blessed; 5) the soul does not need the light of glory to elevate it to see God; 6) the perfect soul is free from virtues; 7) to kiss a woman is a mortal sin since nature does not incline one to it, but the act of intercourse is not a sin, especially in time of temptation, since it is an inclination of nature; and 8) it is a sin not to rise or show reverence at the elevation of the body of Jesus Christ (Decree 28). Numbers 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 could have been extracted from *The Mirror*, but its source is not known, or whether the Free Spirit ideology recognized them as their own.

### **Transcending from *The Lais* to *The Mirror***

Marguerite Porete takes a leap from the foundation laid by Marie de France. At a time when still most women were illiterate—a century after de France—Marguerite Porete’s self-procured education surpassed that of formally educated men. Unlike de France though, Porete did not borrow masculine language. *The Mirror* is written entirely in feminine voice. While de France wrote about men, Porete wrote about God—also male—the most unreachable topic for a woman.

Although de France presented the point of view of the female characters, she kept the titles of the stories, which assigned the protagonist role to the male character. In contrast, Porete decided to make her soul the protagonist in the quest to see God. She wrote a method for humanity but elected not to make a man the subject of her method. A female soul is the example for other souls to follow, female and male. Porete makes the feminine voice of her soul available

to men, offering them an equal opportunity to see God. By providing equality, Porete assumes equality. In fact, by giving men the opportunity to follow the leadership of a female soul, Porete assumes a position almost above men. Porete ignored the secondary place women had in creation, Genesis 2:18-23, and in the social structure of the time as de France ignored the masculine titles and told the stories of the women in the *lais*.

De France wrote *Romances* about men inserting the feminine perspective, voice, and identity, and Porete wrote the kind of text that formally educated theologians were writing, in her own voice and assuming her own identity at a time while in Europe women had no scholarly or religious authority. Furthermore, *The Mirror* challenges several fundamental ideas of Catholic dogma, and it does not use Socrates as support as St. Augustine does in *City of God* and St. Thomas of Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*.

The reference made of the Decalogue in Chapter 3 cannot be ignored, for these rules are addressed to men, without stating that these do not apply to women. *The Mirror* keeps two of the ten commandments, calling them by the same name. For Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff the book is a prose narrative, addressed to women, spoken by L'Ame, engaging in lyrical exchanges with Verite (Truth) and Holy Church (282). De France states that she received knowledge from God and with it the responsibility of sharing it, claiming humbly not to be seeking fame for her work and offering it to the king—addressing it to men. Porete goes further than de France and firmly warns her readers to proceed with humility or they “will not have the intellect for it” (79). *The Mirror* requires humility from educated readers and is addressed to humankind.

De France designs female characters who are loving wives, faithful lovers, and devoted mothers without making an open case for women's capacity to be virtuous. Porete does not make an argument for women's moral capacity either, instead she uses Mary's chastity and devotion to

state women's worthiness to be the mother of Jesus because if God "had found any deficiency in her, he would not have made her mother of his son, for Jesus could only be what his mother is, and not what she is not" (207). Both de France and Porete joined men writers. They wrote the literature that men were writing because *The Lais* are still about chivalric adventures and God is still "He," and Jesus is still "Lord."

### **Transcending from *The Mirror* to *City of Ladies***

Porete's feminine personifications of soul, love, and charity are the subject and the guides of the method that is available to men. About a century later, Christine de Pizan will create three feminine personifications of virtues—Reason, Justice, and Rectitude—who speak only to women. Pizan will publically debate with men, discuss their literature, and make an analysis of their motives in *City of Ladies*. While Porete wrote a sound and deep study about God—approved by high clergy and preserved at the Vatican—she was executed by the Church for insisting on disseminating her ideas. Pizan will write the first defense of womankind, a century later, from a safer position.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### IV. Christine de Pizan's Reinterpretation of Literature

#### Introduction

Christine de Pizan (1364-1430), the first woman professional writer, denounced the slander that male writers had been inflicting on the female gender and devised a metaphorical plan to protect virtuous women within the walls of a city, excluding men. *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) is a defense of womankind, advocating virtue, responding to a literary tradition of misogyny, developing a catalog of women's contributions to humanity, using Socratic irony and a tone that varies according to the moment in the text—demure, didactic, candid, condescending, authoritative, challenging, and passionate—and questioning men's reasons for their written attacks against women.

Pizan crafted an opportunity to engage men in a bargaining exercise, proposing a radical solution to the problem of women's chastity: to build a city using a pen to dig the foundation and the accomplishments of virtuous and courageous women as the bricks. *City of Ladies* challenges the viability of the practice of isolation men used to protect the virginity and then the chastity of a woman. Pizan ridicules men's solution to the "chastity problem," their flawed conceptualization of women, and their complaints against these unruly creatures, women, who fall out of men's control. According to some of the most celebrated men of philosophy, religion, government, and science, women were creatures given to sloth, lust, greed, wrath, gluttony, envy, and pride. In response to repeated written attacks on women's integrity, Pizan retorts with an open defense, demanding full accreditation for women's merit in the different disciplines of life and the opportunity to an education.

### **The First Feminist Tract**

*The Book of the City of Ladies* is the first feminist text, written by the first woman professional writer, building upon the legacy of Marie de France and Marguerite Porete. Pizan marks the moment in literature when a woman publically states that the definition of woman written by men is erroneous, and it is now being rewritten by a woman. In *City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan presents a case in favor of women, offering evidence of women's intellectual and moral capacity. She prepares a history lesson with a feminist perspective as proof of the misrepresentations of women throughout time and a defense for each instance. Pizan advises women to be irreproachable, questions men's assessment of God's design of woman, and speaks in favor of the educating young girls.

### **Methodology**

This study includes selection of genre, style, language, and rhetorical devices, analyzing the content chronologically and presenting it by topic. Pizan develops these topics in stages and in different depth. The analysis of the text includes: biographical evidence, literature and historical context, and religious and social considerations. The topics are: The Quarrel of the *Rose*, Appealing to 15<sup>th</sup> Century Readers, Socratic Irony, Her authority, Women's Authority, The Three Little Books, The Case of Aristotle, The Case of Ovid, Education for Women, and Building a City with the Pen.

The background information provides the context necessary to appreciate the importance and merit of producing an erudite defense of womankind that was accepted by the readership. The analysis focuses on the fusion of feminist criticism and Socratic irony used by Pizan to dispute important texts, which were part of the campaign against women, emphasizing the

academic and social recognition their writers enjoyed. The variation in tone and diction is discussed when and as it pertains to the topic.

The literature review consists of the introduction and translation of *City of Ladies* by Rosalind Brown-Grant, articles from Katharina Wilson, David Hult, Charity Cannon Willard, Ria Vanderauwera, Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, and the anthology of rhetorician by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, the book *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* by Alcuin Blamires, Stanley Appelbaum's introduction of the *Art of Love*, two journal articles by Susan Groag Bell and Gabriel Astrik, and Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, and Ovid's *The Art of Love* and *Metamorphoses*.

### **Biographical Evidence**

Although Italy and France—Pizan's countries of origin and residence—had universities (10<sup>th</sup> c. and 13<sup>th</sup> c. respectively), such educational institutions excluded women. However, Pizan was afforded unusual opportunities for an education, being the daughter and granddaughter of university graduates, wife at fifteen to Maitre Etienne de Castel—royal secretary—mother of three, orphan at twenty-three, widow at twenty-five thus family provider of her elderly mother and a poor niece, and writer at thirty-five (Hult 334-35). Educated by her father and court tutors, Pizan acquired literacy in Italian, French, and Latin, knew some classical texts (mostly in vernacular translations) and had access to the company her father kept, early humanists like Salutati and Petrarch (Bizzell and Herzberg 540).

Before and during her marriage, Pizan lived under the umbrella of the court of Charles V, “one of the most intellectual and forward-looking monarchs of his day” (Willard 334). Pizan turned to writing incrementally, starting by copying legal documents, composing poetic ballads,

longer poems on moral and romantic themes rich in imagery and allegory before Charles V's brother commissioned a history of the king's reign (Bizzell and Hertzberg 540-41). Pizan was in a position of privilege and took advantage of it, dedicating the time she could to study after being daughter, wife, and mother.

### **Literary and Historical Context**

During the century between Marguerite Porete and Christine de Pizan, Dante Alighieri wrote *The Divine Comedy*, and Francesco Petrarca produced the Petrarch sonnets. He publically praised Ovid—who wrote negatively about women—among other poets, during his coronation oration in 1341. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote—among several important pieces of literature—*The Decameron*, a collection of stories—some amusing and some rewritings of others' stories—and *On Famous Women*, a compendium of 106 biographies of women—not all flattering—which Pizan used to write her corrected catalogue (Armstrong).

Important spiritual literature was being written by religious women such as Mystic Hadewijch (literary activity ca.1220-1240). She contributed to Dutch literature with stanzaic poetry and love songs in the troubadour tradition of courtly love and was a pioneer in prose in vernacular (Vanderauwera 186). *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich (1342-ca. 1416) and the *Book of Margery Kempe* are excellent examples of the passion and Christian devotion of women, seeing Christ in their visions and taking from these experiences lessons to teach others (David and Simpson 282-89). On the other hand, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote to entertain all classes of people, fusing their common interests in *The Canterbury Tales*, providing in them a forum to show women's slightly positive side, somewhat assertive, clever, liberal, and not always wicked (165-266).

Fifteen years before Pizan's birth, the devastating Black Death had decimated the population of Europe, leaving many of the survivors psychologically crippled. The inability of the authorities—including the Church—to respond to such catastrophes and the corresponding economic decline served to elevate social awareness. People had more to say about the protection they were not receiving from those with resources at hand, and “[Pizan was writing] for a generation constantly on the brink of civil and international strife, a generation attempting to recover from the ravages of the Black Death” (Bell 173). The political instability of the Crown and the Church were making people question the abilities of those empowered by God. The Church schism (1378-1418) brought politics closer to women, being the only aspect of public life where they could participate, in a limited capacity. A debilitated papacy with French popes residing in France provided an opportunity for women to discuss such affairs since such matters had to do with God.

The social structure was changing, and “[t]hroughout the Middle Ages women wrote and spoke out on controversial issues, including political matters. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and Birgitta of Swede (1303-1373), who tried to end the Church schism, are the best known but by no means the only ones” (Opitz 315). Women were venturing into areas of life dominated by men, reading and expressing their opinions in writing. Pizan became a participant of reshaping the social conscience with *City of Ladies*. Her book was a much-needed defense of her gender against an educational and religious tradition hostile to women and the increasing attacks against the entire female sex by male members of urban craft guilds, trying to exclude the new competition (316-17). Women were gaining a little flexibility to become part of the workforce and start making life decisions as “[f]rom the thirteenth century on, widows became increasingly freed from guardianship . . .” (308). Christine de Pizan was forced by this liberation from

guardianship to invent an autonomous persona, financially and legally responsible for her household.

At this time, *Roman de la Rose*—written about a century before Pizan's birth—had become very popular in the vernacular, circulating widely beyond France, translated into Italian and English (Hult 186). Literature served to entertain, and male writers were repeating gender stereotypes that perpetuated a negative idea of women. Men were not challenging the content of the stories they so much enjoyed, and someone had to make them aware of the harmful effects of their defaming idea of women. As long as the literature was written by men, it would reflect only their point of view. Even when they wrote love poems praising female attributes, men were writing from their perspective and mostly for a male audience. Vern Bullough says, “[l]iterature is molded by the type of audience it has” (*Subordinate* 180). Bullough adds that until women had the financial ability to hire writers and to patronize the production of copies—11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries—the written word was used to promote and celebrate the accomplishments and ideas of men (180-81).

### **Bibliographical Evidence**

Pizan wrote in several different genres and produced important tracts about the education of boys—*Epitre d'Othea, la deesse, que elle envoya a Hector de Troye, quant il estoit en l'aage de quinze ans* and two more with a humanistic element dedicated to her son Jean de Castel—*Enseignemens moraux* and *Proverbes moraux*—both translated into English by William Caxton in 1477 (Willard 338-39). By the time Leonardo Bruni wrote his treatise on the education of girls (ca.1405), Pizan had become an established writer and poet (Bell 174).

The allegorical autobiography *Avison Christine*, written in 1405, addresses the political situation of France, discussing a humanistic concept in a dream-vision format (Willard 338). Her poem *Mutation of Fortune* illustrates the feelings of women who found themselves mourning a husband and facing a life without the financial and legal protection of a man, becoming the family provider, in a sense and in her own words, becoming a male. This poem by Pizan proposes a solution to the confusing situation at the time. Women had little freedom to act without guardianship and little means of finding sustenance on their own. Women could not provide as men, if they were not men. Pizan says this in her poem: "How I, a woman, became a man by a flick of Fortune's hand / How she changed my body's form / To the perfect masculine norm ("Life and Triumphs"). Hult explains that for this woman "*becoming a man* was essential to her ability to function in society as a widow . . ." (191). To be a woman meant to be dependent, fragile, unable to resolve problems for lack of information and determination. It was necessary to act like a man in order for provide and protect her family; it was inconceivable that a woman did that. Women providers did not exist, so she had to become men.

Having to make a living, she followed in the footsteps of Vincent of Beauvais, who composed one of the earliest consolatory letters. Understanding well the sorrows of the widows who lost their husbands in the battle of Agincourt, she composed a consolation treatise, *l'Epistre de Prison de la viehumaine*. It is believed that Pizan was involved in several lawsuits, trying to get the fortune owed to her children and fighting her husband's creditors (Gabriel 5). IN addition, she demonstrated passion and diligence in social and political matters by raising her voice against the unjust treatment of women. Her father educated her like a boy, and life made her a man.

In her two poems *L'Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* (1399) and *Le Dit de la Rose* (1401), “[Pizan] vigorously denounced the immoral literature and the disloyal attitude of Jean de Meun” (Gabriel 8). The court was not the forum for this dispute. Women had no legal recourse; their efforts at literary expression had to be in the social arena, going beyond verbal discussion with other women, engaging in public written debate with educated and respected men.

### **Genre and Language**

*City of Ladies* is a biographical catalogue that celebrates the lives of women, within the framework of an allegorical dream-vision in which the author, Christine, is the chief protagonist and the three personified virtues are: Reason, Rectitude, and Justice (Brown-Grant xvii). The dream allegory or vision was a conventional narrative frame that was widely used in the Middle Ages (Harmon 167). *Roman de la Rose*, written a hundred years earlier is an allegorical dream vision poem, and *City of Ladies* is a prose dream vision. Pizan uses Boccaccio's *Of Famous Women*—106 short biographies of women—as a base to define the compilation of women's lives. However, Pizan “follows Boccaccio in detailing women's contributions to the civilizing process, but whereas he qualifies these with nostalgia for a pre-civilized golden age, she sees the urbanizing process as an indispensable evolution of society” (Blamires, *Case 220*). *City of Ladies* credits women's abilities and initiative to be part of the progress of civilization. Pizan adopts the popular style of literature—narrative allegorical dream vision—to ensure acceptance for the book. The language is feminine throughout, and this is important to Pizan because to gain acceptance for women's perspective, a woman must assert her presence as a woman. The language is educated, polite, admonishing but not insulting because it is authentic. She was a

woman of privilege, demanding respect from educated men, expressing her ideas clearly and supporting her claims, respectfully.

### **The Quarrel of *The Rose***

Pizan publically examined the moral values expressed in one of the most popular poems of the time, *Roman de la Rose*, and she made its writer, Jean de Meun, the target of her reproach, recruiting important support for her cause. She must not have been the only woman outraged by the scorn against women disguised as an allegory of love, but she was the one who openly wrote about it. Rosalind Brown-Grant maintains that Pizan's "main criticism . . . was that it presented an un-Christian view of relations between the sexes, one based on mutual mistrust and antagonism rather than on love and charity" (xxvi). Pizan protested against the popular acceptance—a mostly male readership—of this material in a way that was lasting and could be followed and strengthened by others. Jean de Montreuil and Gontier and Pierre Col defended the poem, but the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, reinforced Pizan's distaste for it. Alcuin Blamires reaffirms that "[s]he censured . . . the use of indecent language, the condoning of deceitful behavior, and the denigration of women" (*Woman* 286).

The disparagement of women in the *Rose* had to be rebuked, precisely because the piece was very popular and credited with didactic merit. According to Gilbert Highet "Ovid's *Art of Love* is a frivolous version of the didactic treatise as written by so many classical philosophers and scientists; and it is the didactic element in *The Romance of the Rose* that echoes him" (65). Proof of the popularity of the poem is the "three hundred manuscripts that have survived, second only to Dante's *Divine Comedy*" (Hult 186). While the theme is romantic love, the content is a set of instructions on how to get, use, and discard women.

Brown-Grant explains that for Pizan, “the *Rose*'s talk of the traps and snares which men need in order to catch their sexual prey encouraged its male readers to think of women as somehow less than human, as almost bestial” (xxvi-xxvii). Men could take note and follow the advice given in this poem, but more importantly, it was cementing in their understanding that it is fair game to hunt women. According to David Hult, the 17,000 lines that Jean Meun added to the 4,000 that Guillaume de Lorris originally wrote, conclude “[recounting] an outrageously obscene and blasphemous scene of sexual intercourse, couched beneath flimsy allegorical language that portrayed the narrator as a pilgrim who penetrates an orifice in the castle wall with his staff in order to gain access to the sacred relics protected therein. . . . [a] metaphorical rape” (186). In fact, the poem ends with an explicit description of the forceful penetration of the fortitude that guards the rose.

More vigorously then I made assault;  
But often as I thrust, so oft I failed.  
If you had seen me there thus tourneying  
You would have been much taken with the sight (L21628-31).  
Three times he struck, and thrice, exhausted, fell;  
Three times he sat, hard-breathing, in the glen,  
Such labor and such pain he had endured.  
So I when I had struggled there so long  
That I perspired in very agony  
Because the palisade would not give way, (L.21631-40).  
That I perceived a narrow passageway (L.21644).  
Though 'twas too narrow and too small for me

I got inside—or, rather, half inside (L.21651-52).  
Though not for anything would I relax  
My efforts till the staff was quite inside  
At last I got it in, but still the scrip  
Remained outside, its hammers knocking there  
For entrance; and so narrow was the path (L.21655-59).  
The passage would have been by far too small  
For me to traverse it, and well I knew  
By this that none had ever passed that way.  
I was the first of men to tread that road  
The place was not accustomed to receive  
The tributes pilgrims well might bring to it.  
I know not whether it has offered since  
Of its advantages to more than me (L.21661-68).

Although Pizan made some unfavorable comments about *Roman de la Rose* in several writings, it is now evident that Jean de Montreuil initiated the exchange of letters regarding this matter by sending her a copy of his enthusiastic commentary on the poem after reading it publicly (Willard 337). Whether he meant to quiet Pizan for her previous disapproving commentary on *The Rose*, or he expected a response, is not known, but Pizan “took issue, point by point, with [the] laudatory article on the *Rose* that Jean de Montreuil was circulating among his acquaintances” (184). Montreuil’s gesture was condescending and could have only been taken as an affront.

Pizan felt compelled to publically state that this very popular poem is a detestable body of misrepresentations of women. She even raised her voice against the provost of Lille to condemn the unrestricted defamation of women. *Roman de la Rose*, even by modern standards, is obscene, vulgar, offensively explicit, and denigrating to women. Centuries before the term “political correctness” was coined, Christine de Pizan made a case for the appropriate social attitude toward literature that belittles women, establishing a precedent. If it is a parody of the sport of conquest enjoyed by some men, it should not be called a love poem.

### **Appealing to Fifteenth Century Readers**

*City of Ladies* begins on a humble note as Christine expresses sadness after reading a book that portrays women as despicable beings, “given up to vice. . . . [concluding] . . . that God had created a vile thing when he created woman” (6). Pizan begins by agreeing with men, presenting no challenge. Nonetheless, she explains the damaging effects of the incessant written attacks against her gender, making her renege of her feminine condition, feeling a “sick heart, in [her] lament to God . . . [thinking of being] very unfortunate that He had given [her] a female form” (7). Pizan starts by concurring with the status quo, leaving controversy for when the reader is more invested in the text, slowly introducing her ideas in a non-confrontational fashion. Furthermore, although the tone changes throughout the text, it is mostly demure, proper, assertive, even passionate, but always respectful.

Rosalind Brown-Grant asserts that “[i]n the absence of a prestigious female forerunner whose arguments [Pizan] could cite as a precedent, [she] turned to the most obvious and unchallengeable source of womanly authority that was available to her: the Virgin Mary” (xxviii). By mirroring the scene of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary with her own dream-

vision experience of meeting Reason, Justice, and Rectitude, Pizan associates the main character, Christine, with the mother of God. Jean de Meun had Aristotle, Augustine had Socrates, and they all had God. Pizan had the mother of Christ. This passage, at the beginning of Part I, sets off the dream-vision as Christine—the main character—suddenly sees a “beam of light, like the rays of the sun” (7). She then looks up and sees the three ladies before her. Any obscure interpretation of the supernatural apparition of three women is obliterated by Christine's quick action to make the sign of the cross on her forehead (8). Christine's humility, devotion, and worthiness of such a miracle were intended to appeal to the most profound Christian sensibilities.

Pizan's unblemished reputation allowed her the bold comparison she makes of the main character, herself, with the Virgin Mary, along with the unattainability of the purity of Mary. Without the intervention of God, women cannot keep their virginity and be mothers, and men cannot impregnate a woman and keep her virginal. But Christians believe it happened; Mary and Joseph were blessed by God.

### **Socratic Irony**

Pizan makes skillful use of Socratic irony, agreeing with men in their rationalization of women's inferior station according to God, linking this thought with the solution men propose. Since women fall short on all virtues, virginity and chastity are the only qualities men can ensure in women since these can be forcefully kept. If it is appropriate to guard a daughter's virginity or keep a wife's chastity locked in a tower, it is suitable to house all women inside the walls of a city to safeguard the exercise of all virtues. Pizan agrees with men's solution to the problem of women's weak morality, but with a different purpose: to protect women from physical and emotional abuse. Although it is never stated directly, the city of virtuous ladies excludes men.

Pizan presents the core of her argument against men in the first chapter: God could not have made woman so appalling. She exposes the injurious intentions of men, declaring that she must “accept [men’s] unfavourable [sic] opinion of women since it [is] unlikely that so many learned men, who seem to be endowed with such great intelligence and insight into all things, could possibly have lied on so many different occasions” (6). Pizan elaborates on the qualities of these men to emphasize their dishonorable intentions and the bad use of the privilege of education that they have, and women lack.

Pizan proceeds to provide explanations for men’s actions, avoiding thus immediate disapproval. Lady Reason explains that philosophers and doctors of the Church have been “correcting each other’s opinions” (8). Lady Reason suggests another excuse for what is undeniable, what is written: interpretation; she says, “[a]s for the poets . . . sometimes wrote in . . . fables . . . saying the opposite of what they appear to say. You should . . . read . . . according to the grammatical rule of antiphrasis, which consists of interpreting something that is negative in a positive light, or vice versa” (8). Pizan takes the next step in her use of Socratic irony by having Lady Reason state that Mathelous’s book could have been “meant to be read like this because there are some passages in [it] which, if taken literally, are just out-and-out heresy” (9). Without accusing Mathelous of heresy, Pizan exposes the gravity of what he wrote about women. It is a demand for an examination of the statements made by this author, without presenting a formal—written—grievance.

After this passionate observation, the voice of Reason continues: “the more authoritative writer of the *Romance de la Rose* [who says] about the God-given, holy state of matrimony . . . that [it] is insufferable thanks to women” (9). The strategy is again is to ask a question for which men do not have a correct answer: “[w]hat husband ever gave his wife the power over him to

utter the kind of insult and obscenities which these authors claim that women do?" (9). Pizan challenges men's ability to exert authority. Jean de Meun wants to have it both ways: be the God-appointed ruler over women, and complain because women fail to comply with his rulings. If men are intellectually superior, how can women outsmart them? Moreover, Pizan calls Meun "the more authoritative writer" opposing Mathelous, veiling her sarcasm behind the respectful modest tone.

Yet, the most daring example of Socratic irony is in her conversation with God. Pizan questions, in an ambiguous way, God's design of life and his reasons for making her one of the inferior humans. Christine almost scolds God: ". . . why wasn't I born a man . . . to serve you . . . do right in all . . . and be as perfect as a man . . ." (7). The tone escalates to reproachful as she adds: "[s]ince you chose not to show such grace to me, please pardon and forgive me, dear Lord, if I fail to serve you as well as I should, for the servant who receives fewer rewards from his lord is less obliged to him in his service" (7). It is her restraint from mockery of men, her equanimity, and her irreprehensible conduct that allows her such an audacious strategy: shaming men for twisting God's intentions. With ironic intent Pizan follows men's aim to reduce women to a lesser than human class, who mindlessly follow—or must follow—direction from their husbands or father because it is God's design. In the same fashion, Pizan gives voice to Lady Reason to announce that the construction of the walled city, which will house only women, has been decreed by God (11).

### **Her Authority**

Pizan reasserts her reputation as a learned woman showcasing her knowledge of history, mythology, and biblical literature. Pizan demonstrates her abilities as a rhetorician by retelling

the stories about women from their perspective, a feminist perspective. Such is the case of Queen Semiramis, who took control of her country after her husband's death, demonstrating great military and leadership abilities, growing her reign and ultimately marrying her son to keep the power (35-37). As rules against marrying your own child were inexistent, Semiramis used this stratagem to her advantage. Semiramis proved her abilities as a leader, but had to be married; that was the rule. She did what she needed to do in order to ensure prosperity for their people.

By demonstrating command of history and mythology, Pizan evokes a new feminine literary voice to champion a new view of women. Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald explain: "Christine establishes her intellectual authority and the authority of her experience as she creates an alternative history of women by demonstrating their wisdom and nobility and the foolishness of men who attack them" (32-33). Pizan is proclaiming the necessity to have role models for women by developing a written account of their achievements, with a feminist perspective, making it available to all, women and men. Susan Groag Bell concludes that ". . . Christine's three-fold aim is to prove women's capabilities, to educate other women by example, and to write women's history" (176).

According to Charity Cannon Willard, "[f]rom the beginning of her career, Christine had been preoccupied by renown . . ." (340). Pizan built the city of ladies with a pen because she understood the value of permanence, writing a book that would be read, rather than be viewed as offensive and, thus, censored. She demonstrates her ability as a rhetorician by creating a text that people would buy and keep in their homes, a book that could inspire and last. Three centuries earlier, Marie de France made an important observation in the *Lais* about protecting her reputation and authorship of her work ("Guigemar" L.5-18). Pizan does not speak of legal protection, but such was not available even to men writers in Europe until the nineteenth century.

### **Women's Authority**

*City of Ladies* celebrates women's accomplishments and abilities, cataloging their contributions to humanity—historical and mythological—like it had not been done before. This compilation of stories about women's devotion to fathers, husbands, sons, and God gave women arguments to defend themselves and reject writings that damaged their self-esteem. The catalog also serves as a source of knowledge that had been neglected, hidden behind men's successes, but available now to men also.

In the same way in which Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas credited God's design to establish the inferiority of women, Pizan too uses the safety of fiction within the dream-vision narrative to credit God for his directive to build the walled city for ladies (11). In addition, in the same stern tone, Pizan offers the metaphor of fire and water, which are vital and cannot be blamed for burn injuries or death by drowning (17). This metaphor places the responsibility on men to use the elements judiciously and treat women appropriately. If women are inferior creatures, men must procure learning opportunities to promote their success, instead of stimulating their negative traits.

Mathelous and Jean de Meun complain and mock women for their lack of intelligence and morality, but they do not offer a solution. Pizan's walled city for ladies can save men from frustration and protect women from abuse, ensuring their chastity and promoting their dedication to virtue (11). The rhetorical strategy in *City of Ladies* is to recognize men's divinely given—yet self-appointed—authority to help women be better human beings instead of belittling them. Her argument is that, even if God made women inferior, he must not have created them to be constantly humiliated.

### **The Three Little Books**

Pizan trivializes and dismisses Mathelous' "little book. . . which [she] considered to be of no authority," by the characterization of "little" and noting that it is not part of her collection (5). She explains that the "immoral language and ideas it contained. . . [would] appeal only to those who enjoy reading works of slander and to be of no use whatsoever to anyone who wished to pursue virtue or to improve their moral standards" (5). This is a reproach to learned men for relishing in reading material that is not elevating.

Pizan's reaction is to ask "why . . . so many men, both clerks and others, have said and continue to say and write such awful, damning things about women and their ways" (5-6). She strengthens her argument by offering another book, *On Philosophy*, ". . . whose [author's] name [she has] forgotten. . . In[which the author], goes to great lengths to argue that men should on no account praise women and that those who do so are betraying the title of this book" (19). Pizan presents a book by an author whose name is not important enough to be remembered, addressing *him* by a pronoun.

Pizan mentions yet "' . . . [a]nother little book in Latin, called *On the Secrets of Women*, which states that the female body is inherently flawed and defective in many of its functions'" (21). Pizan has Lady Reason state: "'[t]hough some may attribute the book to Aristotle, it is unthinkable that a philosopher as great as he would have produced such outrageous nonsense'" (21). Her ability for demure, humble discourse serves to censure the texts without offending the authors or their readership, doing exactly the opposite that these writers do with the female gender in these texts.

Stopping the spread of these texts was critical because, as Lady Reason says, these authors thought of ““themselves to be beyond reproach since they [were] merely repeating what others [had] already said”” (20). European society had arrived at the fifteenth century recycling Aristotle's unproven theory of women's insufficient contribution to the creation of life, for Aristotle writes: “the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the Soul [sic] from the male, since the Soul [sic] is essence of a particular body” (II:IV.738b).

### **The Case of Aristotle**

Pizan reproved the ideas of Mathelous and Jean de Meun for offending women's dignity, but not Aristotle, even though he wrote some of the ideas that these authors use as foundation of their campaign of slander against women. Aristotle wrote: “the female is as it were a deformed male” (*Generation* II.III737a). Pizan makes two mentions of this philosopher in *City of Ladies*: one to associate him with a text he did not write—*On the Secrets of Women*—and the other as an example of her Nature's Compensation theory. According to Lady Reason, nature gives the ““body some greater quality than the one she [takes] away. . . . [as] it's often said that the great philosopher Aristotle was very ugly. . . . Yet, if he was physically misshapen, Nature certainly made up for it by endowing him with extraordinary intellectual powers . . .”” (33).

*Generation of Animals* is an important bestiary, but it does not prove that females are defective males. Aristotle fails to offer anatomical evidence; he makes assumptions, and it is reproachable that so many educated men quoted from this text without further research. This text claims that “the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; *i.e.*, it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul [sic]” (II:III.737a). Moreover, Aristotle offers no evidence to debate opposing theories; he simply dismisses them declaring: “those who take this

view are of course talking nonsense" (IV:I.765a). Aristotle wrote important tracts in many different disciplines, but he was not infallible. It is shameful to realize that men with access to more accurate knowledge of female anatomy used Aristotle's writings to debase women.

### **The Case of Ovid**

Discrediting Ovid is particularly important since he was, and still is, revered for his wisdom, particularly on the topic of *The Art of Love*. "Book One of this text teaches men how to locate and win sex partners, and Book Two teaches men how to hold onto the women they have won (for as long as it suits them)" (Appelbaum xi). Because Ovid's work is foundation for many writers, including Jean de Meun, it was necessary for Pizan to publically admonish Ovid's dissolute behavior and try to diminish his moral authority. So Lady Reason explains to Christine how "Ovid was . . . well versed in the theory and practice of writing poetry. . . . However, his body was given over to . . . vices of the flesh . . . since he had no sense of moderation and showed no loyalty to any particular one" (20).

Pizan expands on the poorly run life of the poet, adding that he lost his good name, his possessions, was exiled, and was castrated because of his immorality (21). Strategically, Pizan does not criticize his poetry, but it is evident that Meun was influenced by passages in *The Art of Love*. In this text, Ovid treats women as hunting prey, who can all be captured. . . . [and know] "every way to extract coin from a love-smitten man" (I:IX: I:XI). The *Rose* is disguised as a romantic poem when it is merely a parody of men hunting women, like wild game.

### **Education for Women**

The tone turns plainly candid when Christine and Lady Rectitude discuss men's claim that it is not good for women to be educated "for fear that their morals will be corrupted" (139-40). Rectitude offers three examples of men who educated their daughters, regretting that not all men follow this good practice. The tone turns condescending as Rectitude asserts how "it is true that those who are not very clever come out with this opinion because they don't want women to know more than they do" (141). Once again, the strategy is only to raise her voice in support of educating girls the way boys are educated. Pizan does not want to upset the social structure. She wants to explain the advantages of educating girls, challenging men to act upon this good idea and do the right thing.

### **Proper Legal Protection for Women**

This was a time when men were the only ones with access to the law. The text addresses the issue of "why women aren't allowed in courts of law" (29). Lady Reason's answer to the question is: "God gave men strong, powerful bodies to stride about and to speak boldly, which explains why it is men who learn the law and maintain the rule of justice" (29). Reason continues explaining that "it would not be right for [women] to . . . bring cases before a court, as there are already enough men to do so" (29). Pizan repeats the strategy of conceding to the social establishment, implying men's responsibility to protect women. Since it is the men's job to make and enforce the law, it is not necessary that women do the job that men can perform. Pizan does not accept men's arguments for not permitting women to present a case in court, bear witness, or pass sentence: that it was due to the bad behavior of a woman in court (29). Reason is outraged and authoritatively labels this accusation as a "ridiculous . . . [and] malicious

fabrication” (29). Reason adds that not even Aristotle could explain the causes and reasons behind everything (29). The implication is that there is no reason for this prescription. Pizan escalates the tone and diction with Lady Reason warning: “if there are those who maintain that women aren't *intelligent* enough to learn the law, I would contradict them by citing numerous examples of women . . . philosophers” which is a more difficult discipline than learning the law (29-30). Of course, she goes on to present examples of women who contributed in this aspect of life.

### **Building a City with the Pen**

At the beginning of *City of Ladies*, Pizan states her intention of raising her voice in women's defense. She starts by asking why men say and write awful things about women (6). Lady Reason declares that the three ladies have come “down to earth . . . to restore order and justice . . .” (10). She explains that they have come to Christine for three reasons: Christine's “long desire to acquire true knowledge . . . to prevent [other women from believing they are worthless, and because] the female sex has been defenceless [sic] for a long time. . .” (11). Lady Reason explains that their mission is “to tell [Christine] that [she] is to construct a walled city, sturdy and impregnable” (11). The city of ladies is a “defensive structure” (Blamires *Woman* 289). Women need to protect themselves because they cannot stop men from abusing their position of privilege.

Pizan did “not . . . wish to overturn the traditional sexual division of labor. Rather she wanted women to receive more credit for what they do, as well as somewhat more freedom, which she justifies as needed for them to meet their family responsibilities” (Bizzell and Herzberg 542). *City of Ladies* ends by advising women to be humble, long-suffering, pure,

modest, timid, steadfast, and respectable (238-39). However, her radical proposal of sexual abstinence for women and complete dedication to virtue was probably a realistic personal plan. It exposed the absurdity of men's solutions to a problem created by them. A girl will keep her virginity until a boy—man—wants to have it; a wife will keep her vow if another man does not help her break it; and, a widow will keep her chastity if a man does not ask for her favors. For Christine de Pizan, a perfect life consisted of living virtuously in the company of other respectable women, while abstaining from sex and other acts that men deemed degrading. "After 1418, she is thought to have . . . taken refuge at the convent of Poissy outside Paris, where her daughter was a nun" (Brown-Grant xxxiv).

### **Transcending from *The Mirror***

Christine de Pizan takes the next step toward the conceptualization of woman and the redefinition of the feminine literary voice mainly by becoming the first professional woman writer, producing the first feminist tract, and declaring that women need a written defense by the power of the feminine mind. Her compilation of the first pro-feminist catalogue of women's contributions to history and literature provides women with defense arguments against men's written attacks. Most of all, *City of Ladies* is a successful application of Socratic irony—long thought to be understood and applied only by men. Pizan demonstrated that women are as capable as men in the field of literature and as defenders of their rights, valuable to society, inspired to reach excellence, and willing and able to assume the male role to provide for their families. She was not weak or sitting idly, waiting to be rescued by a man. Christine de Pizan, like many other women, made the best use of the resources available against life's obstacles, which were often literally created by man.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### V. The Redefinition of Woman

#### Rewriting Reality

Marie de France with *The Lais*, Marguerite Porete with *The Mirror*, and Christine de Pizan with *City of Ladies* conceived the effort of rewriting the concept of woman and the transformation of the rhetorical theory of the feminine literary voice. After centuries of men's attempts to write an idea of woman as inferior to men, women began to rewrite their own notion of woman. These three texts from three women who acquired literacy by their own initiative mark three milestone events in literature that promoted women to a position of equality as writers and people.

After Sappho, the progress of humankind suffered the detrimental consequences of a negative idea that grew over centuries as men put it into written word, making official the notion of women's inferiority, in every aspect. Based on current available research, it was not until the twelfth century that women started to redefine their identity by the power of the pen and the mind of a woman who did not accept what men were writing about women. Marie de France wrote *lais* from the Breton chivalric stories, inserting a distinctly feminine perspective into traditional male stories of adventure. In the early fourteenth century, Marguerite Porete proposed a method to reach God in this lifetime and wrote a treatise that challenges fundamental ideas of Christianity. And, in the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan wrote the first directly-stated defense of womankind, declaring that it needed to be done by women and by the same instrument that men used to denigrate them, the pen.

This study shows the changing feminine voice: from borrowing the male voice and feminizing it in *The Lais* to assuming absolute feminine voice and making it available to male

souls in *The Mirror* to claiming exclusivity of the feminine voice in *City of Ladies*. The first two writers, de France and Porete, wrote in genres and topics exclusive to men until then, producing valuable—genre defining—texts worthy of imitation and inspiration. The third author, Pizan, openly defended women and rewrote history and mythology, claiming her right to write, as a woman, what women want to write in their own literary voice.

### **On Unequal Terms**

It is important to know and remember the participants and the events that produced the state of ignorance endured by women for centuries, for there was a time when literacy was not generally available to women, but not legally prohibited either. Enheduanna, Pan Chao, Sulpicia, Hortensia, Diotima, Aspasia, and Sappho enjoyed the privileges of literacy. However, a century after Sappho, Socrates concluded that women were inferior to men and should be treated as such but trained to perform all duties, including war, thus contribute equally (VI:V.I.451c-d; 452a). Under this premise, women officially became a burden that men were unwilling to carry. Socrates said it, and Plato wrote it. Although it was not a law, men used these words to substantiate similar claims.

A century after Plato, Aristotle wrote that slavery is natural to the human condition, thus that “. . . from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjugation, others for rule” (*Politics* I:5.2). This statement was applied to their own women, not only their slaves—men, women, and children. In fact, even in their participation in procreation, women were deemed lesser. Aristotle wrote a bestiary, *Generation of Animals*, in which he said that in the creation of new life, the female contributes only the matter and the male provides the energy to shape it, in addition to delivering the intellect and the soul (II:IV.738b). Moreover, men of science, religion,

politics, and literature used this text and applied it to their fields of study or professions. They adopted an unproven theory, taught it as fact, and developed other flawed hypotheses from it.

Unfortunately, the literature written by Sappho and her predecessors fell into obscurity and even Socrates's proposal to train women to perform all jobs was unsuccessful. By the fourth century, Augustine, reiterating Genesis 2:18-23, described how "when [God] created the woman . . . he decided not to create her in the same way as he created man himself. Instead he made her out of the man" (*City of God* XII.24). St. Thomas of Aquinas, nine centuries later, explained why and how woman was made from man and not "in the first production of things" (*Summa* Q.92). The repetition of these concepts by men of authority produced more literature—e.g. medical, legal—reinforcing the notion of the inferiority of women.

### **The Beginning of Literacy**

Darcy Butterworth Kitchin explains that "[t]he first period of Provençal literature falls within the tenth and the eleventh centuries. . . . The poems were sung, and handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth" (5-7). Kitchin adds that at this time, writers of religious poetry often approached other topics such as love with some profanity undertones—e.g. the poem "Boethius . . . from the well-known work of Boethius *De Consolatione Philosophiae*" (7-8). However, by the twelfth century, women were learning to write spiritual literature. Hildegard Von Bingen and Heloise d'Argenteuil are examples of diligent dedication to religious service and study. Women began to find opportunities for an education, studying, and beginning to produce their own literature. The conceptualization of woman by women is a process of instinctive individual efforts. It is an urge of innate curiosity, which motivates to know oneself

and other people and things. The female authors discussed in this study represent early steps in the march toward defining “woman” from a woman’s perspective.

### **Borrowing Masculine Language**

Marie de France began the process of writing the concept of woman by subtly introducing her writings into the world of literature, which was dominated by men. Departing from the topic of the feminine spiritual experience, de France decided to write about what was interesting to men. Whether she only wanted to please the king, or she was genuinely interested in the masculine perspective of life, by the very act of translating and writing narrative poetry from the Breton stories, she feminized them; she imprinted her voice into them. It is evident from her language in *The Lais* that de France believed she was intellectually equal to men. She was writing what men were writing, in a developing genre of which she became a principal exponent. Naturally, though, her own words became intertwined with those of the male common folk.

The vehicle of persuasion she uses is humility, but not submission. The underlying message of her work is: “I write because I can.” She clearly states this in the first four lines of her “Prologue” to *The Lais*: “[w]hoever has received knowledge / and eloquence in speech from God / should not be silent or secretive / but demonstrate it willingly.” However, she cleverly obtained approval for her work from the king with her dedication. Marie de France created her own opportunity by writing popular literature that appealed to the main audience, men.

De France plays with the plots and the range of the characters to approach the story from the feminine perspective. Her female characters lack names but not voices. The reader learns about their pain, their trials, their love, and their devotion. In fact, the design of both female and

male characters is realistic. Marie de France could not have anticipated the impact of her work, for it is her version of this masculine oral literature that would be read by everyone.

### **Feminine Language Available to Men**

Marguerite Porete steps out of the constraints of masculine language and writes literature reserved strictly for men, in genre and topic. Porete's thesis of becoming the reflection of God is not a scripture lesson brought to her in a trance or fever to promote women's acceptance of God's plan. Spiritual literature is beautiful and significant, but *The Mirror* is a theological treatise that adds to the idea of divine love and its relation to human love, challenging some fundamental Christian concepts like abandonment of virtue and will, life without sin, and afterlife of love and charity, among others.

It is evident in *The Mirror* that Porete thinks of herself as intellectually and spiritually equal to men. Her serious study of the relation of the soul with God uses a female personification as the subject of her method. She wrote a treatise like men writers, theologians. In fact, she went further; *The Mirror* is a method by which a human soul—female or male indistinctively and in a human body—can see God in this lifetime because that is the purpose of life.

Marguerite Porete's humble demeanor reaches her readers, but her message is clearly that she did not believe to be inferior. She exercised her God-given gift to think, analyze, deduce, and write about the God that loves her female soul in the same way that he loves a male soul. Furthermore, her initiative to obtain support for her book from important clerical authorities was done in the spirit of promoting its message while showing respect for the Church, not the contrary. Porete had to be aware of the implications of her interest in a topic and a genre explored only by few men. She was a courageous soul.

Porete follows Neoplatonist tradition but departs from the format by not using Socrates as support like Augustine and Aquinas. She also departed from Christian tradition by deeming the Eucharist ritual unnecessary and bringing the Virgin Mary back to corporeal existence with a powerful metaphor of the earth cultivated by God. A faithful disciple of God, Marguerite Porete believed she had been given the method to see him and the mission to write and disseminate this message. Despite a difficult subject, and the fatal consequences that were triggered by Porete's diligence, *The Mirror* successfully expounds complex, innovative, and provocative ideas.

### **A Place for Feminine Language in Literature**

Christine de Pizan added a significant effort to the transformation of the feminine literary voice by creating and applying the feminist approach to paternalistic texts and openly stating that women need a written defense. She applied her method to the work of Boccaccio and the rhetorical device of Socratic irony to texts that she deemed morally unfit. *City of Ladies* proposes to protect women's virtue inside the walls of a city where men are not allowed, asks for due credit to women's achievements, and encourages the education of women.

Pizan states and proves that women are intellectually and morally equal to men. With her historical and mythological catalog of women and her dissection of patriarchal texts through Socratic irony, she proves that women are as smart as men. Pizan makes a leap to a moment in literature when a woman writes about the topics that affect her legally, socially, and emotionally. *City of Ladies* testifies for women's intellectual and moral capacities, and questions men's intentions for writing such damaging and false statements about women. The message is that women are human beings with different traits but equal value.

Like de France and Porete, Pizan approaches the readers with humility; she appeals to their sentiment and their logic. In this case, though, her message has become public. The Quarrel of the Rose involved all spheres of social life, and her literary work was available for sale to everyone. In fact, she engaged the sympathy of Jean de Gerson, theologian and Chancellor of the University of Paris, in her public disapproval of Jean de Meun's part of *Roman de la Rose*.

*City of Ladies* offers evidence of women's intellectual and moral stature. In fact, Pizan implies that isolation from men ensures women's virtue. Whether or not she intended to infer that it is men who corrupt women, her walled city is the tacit manifestation of this statement. In effect her book questions men's morality by manifesting the incongruity of educated men who foster the idea of the wicked woman.

Moreover, parting from Boccaccio's *On Famous Women* was essential to rewrite what men had been writing. Retelling history and mythology echoes the work of de France, who retold the Breton stories. Pizan's confident conversation with God about not making her a man resonates of Porete's plan in which a female soul is the subject to show the way to God. Furthermore, Pizan gives an equal treatment of same situations with different gender actors, emphasizing the different treatment women receive for the same conduct.

### **The Progressive Development of the Three Texts**

De France stepped into the world of letters and materialized men's oral literature. She did not write about faith, but about men's fantasies, fears, dreams, and expectations with a feminine voice and perspective. Porete proposed that God creates human beings as souls—with bodies—that can become the reflection of God by ridding themselves of all material elements of existence. And, Pizan addressed corporeal limitations—physical, emotional, and intellectual—in

women and in men, concluding that women can function to the same standards as men. From the fifteenth century to today, a larger number of women have been able to acquire literacy and with it some freedom to think and do. Literature offers the opportunity of the blank page, empty of old and limiting ideas to be filled with the new expectations of women. However, we must not forget how we got this far.

### **The Significance of this Study**

Recognizing the enormity of the efforts women have made to be heard—read—inspires others—not only women, but anyone with an under represented voice—to continue looking for a genuine voice. Writers write from their perspective, from the experience available. Unless women write, the feminine experience will not be known. To this day, history continues to be written mainly by men, and the world keeps missing out on perspective that can enrich and promote progress.

Contemporary women writers can benefit from a clearer understanding of the magnitude of the contribution made by these three pioneering authors. De France, Porete, and Pizan calculated their risks and wrote original and genuine literature. De France must have had a true interest in the masculine idea of love. It is possible that she lived in the court of Henry II and that they were siblings. It is also possible that she had suitors and was married. It was quite a liberal stand to rebel against the literature available to her by writing the kind of texts men were writing, with her own stamp.

Porete, who paid with her life, must have consciously assessed her situation and assumed her fate. Jesus of Nazareth—a role model to her—accepted his destiny: early earthly death at the hands of humankind. Marguerite Porete was offered absolution in exchange for renouncing the

words that love dictated to her. This was a time when learning to write could be considered an act of rebellion, and Porete decided to write controversial ideas about God.

Then, in the fifteenth century, Pizan must have carefully evaluated her moment and resources. She succeeded at introducing her writings into the literature market. Presenting a feminist text in such a paternalist society, while having to provide for her family financially, was a great risk. Nonetheless, while being true to her thoughts and feelings, Pizan wrote *City of Ladies* in a way that the readership, mostly male, would accept.

This study required a literature review through a large span of time and different genres with one objective: trace the progressive definition of woman as inferior by men and the progressive redefinition of woman by women. The three literary texts featured in this thesis were studied as independent steps of a process, within their particular context, which is an important factor to their creation and permanence. I read these three authors with an understanding of their historical moment, with a perspective of the obstacles to write and distribute the texts and the relevance of their contribution to the feminist struggle. The creation of the timeline, which was basic to locate the texts within their literary environment, gave me a panoramic view of literature within history from before Sappho to the fifteenth century C.E. In fact, during the phase of discovery to narrow the topic of this study, the literature review expanded into the twenty-first century C.E. The writings of some male writers, especially from the Greek classical period, are important to me beyond rhetoric, philosophy, and poetry. These texts are closer than I suspected to my core. These writers thought they knew who women are and took the liberty of determining their inferiority, causing great detriment to civilization.

The opportunity to learn how these historical, philosophical, legal, religious, and scientific texts contributed to the development of a “definition” of women provides an important

perspective on what motivated these three women to write something as provocative as *The Lais*, *The Mirror*, and *City of Ladies* in their moment. Women must write, and women must write for their moment. The opportunities women have today are the result of many efforts throughout centuries. It is necessary to know and recognize this to venture into fields and genres still dominated by men. The world has lacked the participation of women to the extent of their potential. Marie de France, Marguerite Porete, and Christine de Pizan applied their minds, their labor, and assumed risks to raise their voices. Male writers have been giving women small parts in their literature and a voice that it is simply not authentic. The power of the written words is more evident than ever to me. Women writers must write about their world, the world in which they coexist with men.

### **Further Study**

Three other types of analysis can be made with this research, one in literature, another in psychology, and yet another in literary historiography. The first is an exploration of the treatment of lust in women's literature as opposed to men's literature. Given that lust is often still viewed as a sin for which women pay a higher sanction, it is appropriate to look for it in their literature. A study of men's lust in the *Lais*, the lust for purity in the *Mirror*, and the *City of Ladies* without lust is capable of producing ideas about women's treatment of this topic—consciously and unconsciously.

The analysis from the psychological aspect of the female and male minds offers two alternatives: the female's motivation to learn and the male's motivation to stop the female from learning.

1. The study of the female psychological mechanisms that drove them to regain access to an education, maneuvering through social, legal, and religious obstacles can show how motivation operates in the mind of a woman to design early education programs for girls.
2. The study of the psychological processes that facilitated men's rationalization to deny women an education—and their dignity with it—can shed information on the selection process that provokes destructive actions over prosperous ones.

A study in literary historiography that focuses on finding other women who used the written word to dismantle the male-generated definition of women in both subtle and obvious or aggressive ways, evaluating the impact of their contribution in future events is necessary. The preliminary discovery phase of this study took me to documents that were part of political and legislative efforts in which women participated from their reduced positions but in important ways. Writings by Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe Gouges presented arguments for a better life for women and children, thus humanity. Before John Stuart Mill and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, women, behind the scenes and perhaps many, were studying, analyzing, and writing strategies to live improve.

### **The Elusive Opportunity to Write**

Several centuries after Pizan, Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, would write that women did not enjoy the liberty to write that male writers had. Speaking about Shakespeare Woolf states that “[a]ll desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and unimpeded” (55). With a bit of contempt Woolf reiterates,

[t]hat one would find any woman in that state of mind in the sixteenth century was obviously impossible. One has only to think of the Elizabethan tombstones with all those children kneeling with clasped hands; and their early deaths; and to see their houses with their dark, cramped rooms, to realize that no woman could have written poetry then. What one would expect to find would be that rather later perhaps some great lady would take advantage of their comparative freedom and comfort to publish something with her name to it and risk being thought a monster. (56)

Women have been rewriting their story in a slow, careful, and lasting way, documenting their struggle, and improving their stand in the world. Literature reflects the world and can have the power to affect it. Literature and law have traditionally been closely associated (Alford 941). Writers have drawn from man-made law to make literature; but, more importantly, the power of the written word is enormous. Socrates, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas are still authorities on issues of the spirit and the flesh, and the Bible is still revered as the word of God. The works by de France, Porete, and Pizan are evidence of women's resilient attempts to demonstrate their true worth in every aspect of life. One day, women will be seen as equals to men and the ideas of women's inferiority will become part of the past. Women will no longer be "secondary in creation, and primary in guilt" (Millett 52). The place and time where men do not define women as inferior is in the future. Women will continue to write.

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