



Joining the Great Conversation from the Outside: Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*

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Christine de Pizan presents her book to Margaret of Burgundy. An illustration from *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. Paris BNfr. 1177, folio 114 c. 1475.

Half a page into my weekly reading for The Great Conversation, “my good mother called me to refresh myself with some supper,” just as Christine de Pizan’s mother called her. When I returned, I found myself resonating with Pizan, a female Italian writer of the Late Middle Ages. Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* opens with a scene some women of the humanities will find familiar: Pizan picks up a book, finds once again “wicked insults about women and their behavior,” and wonders how it is “that so many...learned men” disparage women in their works. She is confused and begins to inspect her own “character and conduct” and those of other women she knows. Though she cannot understand how these claims could be true, she wonders why there seems to be such unanimous abuse of women across the spectrum of the minds she admires most; ultimately, she despairs. Pizan’s distress continues today. I, a seventeen-year-old Great Books student, have often felt the same. The Western Canon, the collection of esteemed philosophy and literature of this hemisphere that history has deemed Great, at times seems to be full of misogyny. When I read Schopenhauer’s “On Women,” Rousseau on gendered virtues and vices, and Aristotle on the deficiency of the female person, I’ve wondered something akin to Pizan’s cry of: “How can this be?”

The Western Canon and Great Books in general are no longer only accessible to the traditional recipients of a deep liberal arts education, the European male aristocracy. The gates of entry have been opened: every document is open-source and “Gutenberg’d” and at the fingertips of anyone with an internet connection, along with commentaries and articles and essays on every conceivable theme. But the gates have not been demolished. The question still remains: How should those historically outside the Western Canon, either condemned or barred or erased by it, approach? Gender is only one example that I am best equipped to attest to; this is not to mention the racial pseudoscience of many lauded Enlightenment thinkers, the anti-abolitionism of many of the American Founding Fathers, and many other exclusions of the Western Canon. This is a genuine question. It does not derive from “wokeism” or “identity politics” and is surely not a modern question if the medieval Pizan was struggling with it six centuries ago. Luckily, Pizan’s process of struggle provides a robust answer to this question: in refusing to dismiss, deconstruct, defile, or submit to this conceptual behemoth of the Western Canon, Pizan embraces the task of which Ladies, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, instruct: to build.



Justice, the Virgin and Saints, MS Harley 4431, f.361r, France, c.1410-14

The first error Pizan avoids is the tendency to dismiss – that those we deem “unenlightened” have nothing to teach us and we may discount the Canon because of the prejudices of many of its minds. This instinct is rampant today, seen everywhere from the decline of the humanities major to my freshman year science class, in which my teacher called Aristotle an “idiot” because of his outdated natural philosophy. Returning to the Founding Fathers, many reject the ideas of these men wholesale because of their racism and slaveholding status. While slavery was and is undoubtedly despicable, we must be able to acknowledge the prejudice of a thinker while still acknowledging their significance, seeking to examine and explain their work with thought, attention, and good faith. Pizan exemplifies this perfectly. Though she condemns the misogynistic words of those she reads as “lies,” she acknowledges them as “upstanding men of old...made perfect in wisdom.” Ovid, whose railings against women she criticizes, she still calls “a man skilled” with “great wit and understanding.” In her castigation of Aristotle’s historically influential “deficiency” rhetoric, she praises him as a “fine mind.”

Pizan also resists an all-too familiar tendency to deconstruct. There is no hint of oppressor-oppressed dichotomy in her discussion of gender relations, only of goods and evils practiced by both. She imposes no created structure of hierarchy into what she reads but instead encounters the works as they are, investigating each claim for truth and goodness instead of filtering it into a dozen systems of power.

Neither does she defile it, labeling the Canon as uniformly evil, a fundamentally immoral body of work. First, she acknowledges its internal disagreements, even recognizing the misogyny she encounters as “diverse and varied.” There is wrongness in the Canon, like any other collection of work written by fallible human beings. Pizan writes passionately that “sweeping ignorance never provides an excuse.” But even apart from error, the Canon is imperfect in the ontological sense, incomplete by its human nature. As Aquinas, after a life of brilliant philosophy, recounted after a witnessing of the Beatific Vision, everything he created was “straw” in comparison with God Himself. But the study of anything is incomplete, and disciplines must exist to engage in anything interdisciplinary, in pursuit of a fuller truth. The study of the Great Books by themselves is a worthy pursuit despite their imperfections, even by those they have not historically welcomed. It cannot be abandoned.

Finally, Pizan averts a much subtler fallacy: complete submission to the Canon. A certain amount of reverence (or at least attention) is due to anything ancient, the Great Books included. Rainer Maria Rilke captures this due respect in his poem “The Archaic Torso of Apollo”. Rilke describes a statue of the Greek God “suffused with brilliance from inside” that can “burst like a star” “from all borders of itself.” In the light of the statue’s downcast gaze there is “no place that does not see you. You must change your life.” These Great Books make claims on us and emit their own radiance. Intrinsic or not, we must acknowledge their greatness and approach with varying degrees of deference. Pizan balances this while still understanding that something or someone’s inclusion in the Canon does not mean their works are gospel truth. Pizan writes that “the words of philosophers” are not “articles of faith.” She challenges historical models of wisdom such as Cicero, the followers of Albertus Magnus, and Cato the Younger. She understands that Great Books are not solely something to be studied and observed and bowed before, but a project of meaning in which to participate.

Pizan embraces this project, encountering in the piece three dream-visions of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice who instruct her to build the City of Ladies. Pizan’s task is constructive and a wonderful example: Add. Clarify. Cultivate and gather the excellent historically excluded to function within this canon. Like Pizan writes, be “ready to...send forth new branches capable of bearing fruits.” Using sex as a start, include Yelena Hahn in your mental list of the greats of Russian Literature. When you speak of the Scholastics, don’t let St. Hildegard of Bingen escape mention. In any serious invocation of twentieth century philosophy, include Anscombe and Edith Stein. Like Pizan articulates, do not “shun what you know for a certainty and believe what you do not know or see or recognize.” Pizan does not withhold “however” after her praise of Ovid. It is not an intellectual sin to call something diabolical “diabolical.” If it’s a lie, call it a lie – but do not forget to articulate the positive truth, which wields a power that mere criticism and dismissal could never command.

Pizan exemplifies a truly commendable attitude for approaching the Western Canon when one feels outside of it. She embodies intellectual humility, (acknowledging the brilliance of those she reads and labeling herself as the “simple and ignorant student”), intellectual autonomy (daring to reason herself, disagree and disprove), and intellectual productivity. She does not write a screed of theory, but a beautiful, insightful work that today joins Chaucer and Alighieri and Maimonides in this Great Conversation.



Christine de Pizan building the ‘City of Ladies’, from ‘The Book of the Queen’, Paris, c. 1410–1414: Harley MS 4431/2, f. 290r