

Christine de Pizan

The Book of the City of Ladies

Summary

This edition is the first Polish translation of Christine de Pizan's work. It is preceded by an introduction discussing the writer's life and work in its historical, cultural and literary context. Christine de Pizan (1364 – c. 1429) was France's first professional female writer. Works dedicated to the defence of women are an important part of her oeuvre, the most famous of which is the *Book of the City of Ladies* (*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*), written between 1404 and 1407 and modelled on Boccaccio's work *On Famous Women* (*De mulieribus claris*, 1361–1362), translated into French in 1401. Using the text of her predecessor, Christine de Pizan contradicted his opinions on women and where Boccaccio rebuked their vices, she emphasised their virtues. She replaced the chronological structure of the collection *On Famous Women* with a deliberate structure, with the construction of an allegorical city at its centre. Divided into different categories, the lives of exceptional women are compared to the stones that make up the building. Thus, the first part contains the lives of women whose fame derived from qualities traditionally attributed to men, such as courage, leadership skills, physical strength or eloquence. In contrast, the second part presents heroines who became famous thanks to virtues considered typically feminine. Here, even the argument traditionally used against women of their inherent physical frailty is turned to their advantage: it is thanks to this weakness that women are not prone to violence and, on the contrary, are able to build a civilisation based on law. Finally, in the third section, de Pizan portrays women as advocates of peace and defenders of the oppressed. The polemical eloquence of the *Book of the City of Ladies* and its apologetic character are strengthened by the introduction of three extraordinary female allegorical figures: Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude and Lady Justice. Introducing these figures facilitates a scholarly debate of a scholastic nature: de Pizan presents the arguments levelled against women, shares her doubts, gives voice to her concerns, and in receiving clear, example-supported answers from her scholarly female guides, leaves no doubt that women, like men, are endowed with virtues, and are capable of creative work and great deeds.

Translated by Rob Pagett