The Division of Love and Feminine Desire: Christine de Pizan and Marguerite de Navarre

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Pangs of Love and Longing: Configurations of Desire in Premodern Literature

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One of the more salient features of medieval and early modern discourses of love as well as of its object of desire is division. Petrarch formulates a revealing example in the Secretum (c. 1347): “I think that love can be called either the most loathsome passion or the noblest deed, depending on what is loved” (Pro diversitate subiecti amorem vel tetririmam animi passionem vel nobilissimam actionem dici posse censeo). He makes clear that the former is tied to an immoral (infamis) woman while the latter dedicates itself to the rare (rarus) model of a virtuous woman (specimen virtutis).¹

This divided configuration of the object of desire is by all evidence a reflection of the classical and Christian evaluation of carnality as bad and spirituality as good. The hierarchy between the body (and what is supposed to belong to the body) and the soul (logos, spirit, etc.) determines the kinds of love that are displayed in Western cultural and literary history. The higher evaluation of spiritual love over corporeal love can furthermore be related to the biopolitics of early Christianity. It has been argued that the promotion of asceticism and other form of control of the body, desire, and passion was used as a method to empower the Church against the Roman and feudal order.² The designation of celibacy as a virtue, and virginity as an ideal, as well as the regulation of marriage, can partly be understood as strategies securing property and capital for churches and monasteries.

In this process it has been noted that women came to play roles as agents. As Howard Bloch points out, they “endowed nunneries and monasteries, paid for pilgrimages, supported scholarly enterprises, and sustained the charitable undertaking of those who ministered to the poor”.³ The Christian ideology of asceticism could hence serve as a ground for a female subject position in a patriarchal order, and scholars have even claimed that it promoted women’s liberation.⁴ In this article, however, I want to point to another kind of freedom, the one we find in a discursive
practice. I will try to show that premodern women writers in spite of a patriarchal order demonstrate a liberty as enunciating subjects. By looking more closely at works by Christine de Pizan and Marguerite de Navarre, this article argues that they make use of dominant configurations of love and desire, freeing them in ways that serve their own desire and interests in the interplay of power relations.

Elementary Structures

When what is loved (subiecti amorem) begins to talk in women writers’ texts from the medieval period on, one can note that the divided configuration of love is maintained, but used in a different manner. Women writers such as Christine de Pizan and Marguerite de Navarra appropriate the idealized or elevated form of love with its concomitant debasement of corporeal love, in ways that differ from a passive reception of male desire, which nevertheless can be said to determine the configuration as such. It is no doubt a fundamental structure in a variety of dominant discourses in the classical and Christian legacy, but also in more modern forms. It seems to have a correspondence to a specific psychic structure described in psychoanalytic theory. In his article “On the Universal Tendency to Debasing in the Sphere of Love”, Freud argues that a culturally imposed impediment to the sexual union increases the value of love and its object, and vice versa: “It can easily be shown that the psychic value of erotic needs is reduced as soon as their satisfaction becomes easy.” More generally he claimed that the phenomenon could be related to the cultural configuration of earthly and heavenly love.

One of the more obvious articulations of this division and its different conjugations is to be found in courtly literature. As Jean-Charles Huchet points out, in the Occitan troubadour lyric at the beginning of the twelfth century the woman became a literary object in a masculine discourse of desire, where she was either worshipped or denigrated according to the literary genre’s bipolarity. In the lyrics of fin’amors the Lady is idealized and unattainable; in the misogynistic counter-text, she becomes the incarnation of all the vices or reduced to an object of possession, as the first troubadour William IX (1071–1127) articulates it: “Tant las fotei com auziretz: / Cen e qatre vint et ueit vets!” (“How often I screwed them you will now hear: One hundred and eighty-eight times!”). Even though Freud never talked about courtly love, psychoanalytical followers such as Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek have shown a sustained interest in the phenomenon. According to Sarah Kay, Lacan “sees modern subjectivity as deriving from the erotic configurations...
of medieval courtly love poetry”. This subjectivity must be regarded as masculine or at least based on a theory of the male (loving) subject. As Kristeva puts it, the configuration of the Lady is “simply an imaginary addressee, the pretext for the incantation” that is the courtly lyric.

In Seminar XX Lacan describes courtly love as “an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relations by pretending that it is we who put an obstacle to it”, and he makes clear that the “we” he is referring to is male: “For the man, whose lady was entirely, in the most servile sense of the term, his female subject, courtly love is the only way of coming off elegantly from the absence of sexual relation”. In this view the configuration of the Lady in courtly literature as well as her counterpart in courtly counter-texts is regarded as a solution to what is taken to be a fundamental lack or impossibility in the constitution of the subject and hence for its desire. Huchet describes the psychoanalytic logic of desire in fin’amors in the following way:

If the sexual act does not function as a fusion, but instead reveals an insurmountable solitude à deux, i.e. a radical insufficiency, one must renounce it by giving the illusion of an absolute control of renouncement, feigning that it is oneself that creates the obstacle.

Žižek draws on the same idea when he claims that the troubadour is a man who “pretends that his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady”. In order to keep desire intact—in order to sublimate desire into fin’amors—the Lady must remain inaccessible, if she were to “step down from her pedestal, she would turn into a repulsive hag”, which is also in accordance with Freud’s observation about “the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love”. Idealization and debasement of the object of desire are hence two sides of a discursive configuration related to masculine subjectivity. Scholars interested in an articulation of a desiring female subject in the courtly discourse have contested the courtly paradigm, as Burns puts it, “by moving women from the position of embodied, absent, and distanced object of desire into the role of subjects in a number of ways that expand and subvert the conventional romantic love story”. The “conventional romantic love story” with its idealized configuration of women is hence regarded as misogynistic; to quote Burns once again: “the courtly lady’s putatively central position within the ideology of courtliness actually displaced and marginalized her.”

My approach is close to Burns in that it will “see oppressive structures, however monolithic they may seem or claim to be, as necessarily fragile, permeable, and open to resistance”. I do not however reduce idealization
in courtly literature to a mere masculine convention used to keep women subordinated in a social order, even if it by all evidence also has that function. By defining this specific configuration and its concomitant facet, debasement, as a discursive element in the hegemonic structure, I argue that it can be used in many ways. In other words, I regard the legacy of courtly literature as a play of discursive relations and as something that is still undergoing different appropriation, not least by literary critics trying to assess its value and scope. This is probably due to the variegated manipulations of the code’s ambiguity in troubadour lyrics, romances of chivalry and its continuations through different social and cultural contexts over time. Here I look more closely at two of those writers that take the legacy of courtly love further by making its discourse unstable (Christine de Pizan), and polyvalent (Marguerite de Navarre).

Christine de Pizan and the Process of Misogyny

In the closing chapter of the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* from 1405 the author warns women to engage in the domain of passionate love:

Oh my ladies, flee, flee the foolish love they [the flatterers] urge on you! Flee it, for God’s sake, flee! For no good can come to you from it. Rather, rest assured that however deceptive their lures, their end is always to your detriment.

O! mes dames, fuyez, fuyez la fole amour dont ilz vous admonnestent! Fuyez la pour Dieu, fuyez, car nul bien ne vous en peut venir, ains soiés certaines que quoyque les aluchement en soient decevables que tousjours en est la fin a voz prejudice.

The negative attitude towards what is called *fole amour*, simply put a concept of love as sex, constitutes a principle in the medieval discourse of love, and it is certainly an important issue in Christianity. What is perhaps not evident at first sight, is the quotation’s direct reference to the second part of the canonical *Roman de la rose*, written by Jean de Meun, where Nature gives men her guidance:

Fair lords, protect yourself from women […]
Fly, fly, fly, fly, fly, my children;
I advise you […] to fly from such an animal

Seigneur, gardez vous de voz fames
[…] Fuiez, fuiez, fuiez, fuiez,
Fuiez, enfanz, fuiez tel beste
In an openly misogynous vein Jean de Meun represents women as the incarnation of the sexual aspect of love.\(^{27}\) They are said to be animals, which underline the moral debasement of this love. In her turn Christine uses a double strategy, which is neither an acceptance nor a refutation of established models, as Blanchard puts it, “Christine plays the game with perfect bad faith because the authors who speak against women are at the same time the very ones who will inspire her.”\(^{28}\)

Already in her first texts Christine engages in this playful and critical dialogue with the dominating discourse of love.\(^{29}\) In her debate poem *Le Livre du Debat de deux amans*, written five years earlier than the *Cité des Dames*, she uses the same phrase as in her allegory, but here expressed by a “courteous and gentle knight” (courtis chevalier amiable), and directed towards any kind of love:

No matter how it begins,
Love always ends badly
Fly, fly,
This love, young people!

Quieulx que soient d’amours les commençailles
Tous jours y a piteuses deffinailles.
Fuyez, fuyez,
Yceste amour, jeunes gens!\(^{30}\)

In the poem the knight’s speech is however scrutinized by a Lady who questions its seriousness: “For my part, gather that it’s not customary to speak of love in that way if not in jest” (*Love Debate*, 107; Et quant a moy, tiens que ce n’est que usage / D’ainsi parler d’amours par rigolage). She sustains her view by an explicit reference to “le Rommant de la Rose” (108). Given Christine’s refutation of the misogyny of Jean de Meun, she is indeed using a double strategy here, which dismantles the work’s authority. As Altmann points out, the reference goes to Reason, who “stresses the contradictions and the many dangers of passionate love”.\(^{31}\) The motive for Jean de Meun is however, as Strubel points out, a criticism of “amours fines”, which he wants to reveal as a euphuism hiding the presence of sexual desire.\(^{32}\)

If we consider that “amour fines”, or *fin’amors*, as the troubadours called it, opposes love as sex, the Lady’s words in the love debate poem can be understood as a generalized argument against this specific understanding of the courtly code from a woman’s point of view. Simply put, because of men’s falseness women risk losing their idealized position if they acquiesce to passionate love.
Also the warning against men’s false speech aiming at seduction is an “appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it”, as Foucault puts it. For women are depicted in the misogynistic tradition as sophisticated seducers bringing men to their end, as in these lines in the *Lamentation de Matheolus*:

I would have done better to shield my eyes  
The day I first saw her  
And so esteemed her beauty  
And her sweet angelic face  
Covering sophisticated woman

Mieulx me venist mes yeux bander  
Au jour que premier l’avisay  
Et que sa beauté tant prisay  
Et son doux viaire Angelique  
Dessoubs la fame sophistique

One could even say that this view on women sparked the project of writing the *Cité de Dames* considering that the opening scene of the allegory refers to the *Lamentation de Matheolus*. Reading it, the narrator Christine discovers however a paradigmatic example of misogyny revealing to her that none of the other books she was studying previously contradicts its defamatory language. And she begins to wonder

How it happened that so many different men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behaviour. Not only one or two and not even just this Mathéolus (for this book had a bad name anyway and was intended as a satire) but more generally, judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators—it would take too long to mention their names—it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth.

Qu’elle peut ester la cause ne don’t ce peut venir tant de divers hommes, clercs et autres, ont esté et sont si enclins a dire de bouche et en leurs traictiez et escris dans tant de deableries et de vituperes de femmes et de leurs condition, et non mie seulement un ou .ij., ne cestui Matheolus, qui entre les livres n’a aucune reputacion et qui traicte en maniere de trufferie, mais generaument auques en tous traictiez, philosophes, poetes, tous orateurs desquielx les noms dire seroit longue chose, semble que tous parlent par une mesme bouche et tous accordant une semblable conclusion, determi- 

nent les meurs feminins enclins et plains de tous les vices.

*(Cité 42, trans., 4)*
This opening scene in Christine’s allegory illustrates the female subject’s meeting with the objectification of her identity—the misogynistic representations of women in medieval canon—that will be refuted by the construction of a city of Ladies using the configuration of the idealized Lady in the courtly legacy as one her prime strategies.\(^\text{36}\)

According to Kristeva the very possibility of idealization disappears when the representation of women is transformed from an inaccessible reference in courtly lyric to an object of knowledge and possession in the allegory of the rose.\(^\text{37}\) This is a suggestion that can be sustained by Christine’s critique of the work’s misogyny.\(^\text{38}\) At the same time she shows in her own allegory that this possibility can be put to use anew, not as a masculine configuration of love and women, but as an aspect of feminine desire.

In her allegory she deplores that the “ladies and all valiant women” have for long time been

exposed like a field without surrounding hedge, without finding a champion to afford them an adequate defence, notwithstanding those noble men who are required by order of law to protect them, who by negligence and apathy have allowed them to be mistreated. It is no wonder then that their jealous enemies, those outrageous villains who have assailed them with various weapons, have been victorious in a war in which women have had no defence.

delaissées, descloses comme champ sans haye, sans trouver champion aucun qui pour leur deffence comparust souffisemment, nonobstant les nobles hommes qui par ordonnance de droit deffendre les deussent, qui par negligence et nonchaloir les ont souffertes fouler, par quoi n’est merveille se leur envieux ennemis et l’oultrage des villains, qui par divers dans les ont assaillies, ont eu contre elles victoire de leur guerre par faulte de defence.

\(^{\text{Cité 54, trans., 10}}\)

The defence Christine will offer in her turn is a reworking of a medieval canon where women (mythical as well as historical) are represented as incarnations of vices or virtues depending on the author’s mode and purpose. Strategically she often celebrates what legitimate tradition condemns, as Quilligan puts it.\(^\text{39}\) As a writing woman she is nevertheless part of a cultural elite and hence of the hegemonic order, but she articulates a strategy and a desire to counteract the constructions that debase or denigrate women, which calls into question the divide itself.

As in courtly love we are dealing with a discursive desire (a fantasy and a configuration) but in Christine’s writing the dualistic representation of woman as either idealized or debased is put into a process where
idealization shows its violent roots. On the one hand, Christine’s catalogue of women are idealized incarnations of virtues, they are “noble dames” described with epithets from the courtly tradition, even though they are pagan or Christian, mythical or historical, and all are assimilated to the Virgin Mary. On the other hand the stories about these honourable ladies are also in a fundamental manner connected to war or death, from the incestuous warrior queen Semiramis and the amazons to the Christian martyrs. Christine’s most effective argument against the misogynistic representations of women in canonical texts could be described as an upheaval of the dialectical movement of idealization of women into debasement by destabilizing the hegemonic discourse, but without giving up the division of love into amours fines and fol amour.

To be sure, it was not Christine’s purpose to de-idealize the medieval representation of woman. At the end of the Cité des Dames she presents a virtue ethics where the object of medieval allegory—the woman—is addressed and represented as subject:

My most dear ladies, it is natural for the human heart to rejoice when it finds itself victorious in any enterprise and its enemies confounded. Therefore you are right, my ladies, to rejoice greatly in God and in honest mores upon seeing this new City completed, which can be not only the refuge for you all, that is, for virtuous women, but also the defence and guard against your enemies and assailants, if you guard it well.

Et mes tres cheres dames, chose naturelle est a cuer humain de soy esjouyr quant il se treuve avoir victoire d’aucune emprise, et que ses ennemis soient confondus. Si avez cause orendroit, mes dames de vous esjouyr vertueusement en ieu et bones meurs par ceste nouvelle Cité veoir parfaicte, qui peut estre non mie seulement le refuge de vous toutes, c’est a entendre des vertueuses, mais aussi la deffence et garde contre voz ennemis et assaillans, se bien la gardez.

(Cité 498, trans., 237)

The ethical attitudes required to live in the Cité des Dames do not challenge the medieval social order where woman’s virtue is determined by a patriarchal feudal order. But Christine’s strategy, which releases and transforms the other side of the medieval idealization of women, i.e. the motives of their debasement, into new symbolic representations, dismantles the power of the enemies’ attacks. This is perhaps to add fuel to the war of the sexes, but it is also a remedy against misogyny and a reason why Christine at the end of her book can enjoin all women to rejoice. In this way Christine also makes it evident that the discursive order is
unstable, possible to be reworked and reshaped in accordance with a female desire.

**Marguerite de Navarre and the Polyvalence of Love**

Marguerite de Navarre’s some seventy stories that constitute the *Heptaméron* (1559) tell us a lot about the dominant ideas of love—Christian, courtly, and Neoplatonic—during the Renaissance. It is well known that the period’s predominant love code was motivated by an interpretation of Plato through a Christian discourse. As a discursive element it appears at various places in the *Heptaméron*, as in the discussion in novella 19 when Parlamente, often considered as a representation of Marguerite herself, gives her definition of a perfect lover: “‘Those whom I call perfect lovers,’ replied Parlamente, ‘are those who seek in what they love some perfection’” (J’appelle parfaict amans, lui respondit Parlamente, ceux qui cherchent en ce qu’ils aiment quelque perfection) and she explains what she means by perfection, “For the soul, which was created solely that it might return to its Sovereign Good, ceaselessly desires to achieve this end while it is still within the body” (Car l’ame, qui n’est creée, que pour retourner à son souverain bien, ne fact tant qu’elle est dedans le corps, que desirer d’y parvenir).\(^{42}\) It is made clear that the “Sovereign Good” is nothing but the Christian God. The Christian configuration of “Platonic love” is nevertheless only one element among others in Marguerite’s *Symposium*.

If we take a look at the character that is usually supposed to incarnate the Neoplatonic attitude towards love, Dagoucin, one can easily see that he has more in common with the courtly love code. In the discussion after the novella 70, which is a transposition of the medieval poem “La chastelaine de Vergi”, Dagoucin points out the loyalty to a Lady as a condition for the courtly chevalier. If there were no Lady to love and be rewarded by, “then instead of following the profession of arms, we should all turn into mere merchants, and instead of winning honour, seek only to pile up wealth” (*Heptaméron* 583, trans., 533; il faudroit au lieu d’hommes d’armes, faire des marchand: et en lieu d’acquerir honneur, ne penser qu’à amasser du bien). It is hence not Platonic love that is the object here but a reminiscence of a “feudalism’s ethics of ‘nonproduction’”, and its courtly love code.\(^{43}\)

This courtly legacy is also the topic in the often-commented novella 10, which is told by Parlamente. In brief, it is the story of a knight—Amador—who decides to love a Lady that he knows he cannot marry because of social differences. He nevertheless shows her all the signs of
perfect love and the Lady in turn makes him his “amy”. Yet the point of the story is Amador’s betrayal of the code and his “folle amour” (146). When his real intention becomes clear the Lady Florida asks what it is that drives him “to seek that which can give you no satisfaction, and to cause me the greatest sorrow anyone could ever cause me?” (Heptaméron 152, trans., 147; de chercher une chose dont vous ne sçauriez avoir contentement, et me donner un ennuy le plus grand que je sçaurois avoir).

In the novella the courtly code and the Lady’s position are clearly opposed to the “warrior-gallant ethic” represented by the knight’s behaviour and further on defended in the discussion by Hircan. In other words there is in the story as well as in the discussion a combat between perfect love and sexual fulfilment that, from the Lady’s point of view, will be the beginning of her degradation from an idealized object of desire worthy of love into an object of consummation and possession.

The Lady, who has been forced to marry a man that she does not love because it was a good affair in the context of courtly politics, knows very well what the lover’s desire implies: “you have clearly demonstrated to me that I would have been building not upon the solid rock of purity, but upon the shifting sands, nay, upon a treacherous bog of vice” (Heptaméron 146–47, trans., 143; Amadour, en un moment m’avez monstré, qu’en lieu d’une pierre nette et pure, le fondement de cest edifice est assis sur un sablon leger et mouvant, ou sur la fange molle et infame).

The foundation of their love relations was hence an avoidance of the sexual act that in part also has an economic dimension insofar as it intercepts a social order where women are men’s property. This is obviously the order which the lover takes for granted when Amador in his turn defines courtly love as a sexual relation outside marriage, and more important, that he has the right to possess his beloved: “now you are a married woman. You have a cover and your honour is safe. So what wrong can I possibly be doing you in asking for what is truly mine?” (Heptaméron 145, trans., 141; maintenant que vous estes mariée, et que vostre honneur peult estre couvert, quel tort vous tiens je de demander ce qui est mien?) Florida’s perseverance is met by Amador’s transgression of the courtly code when he attempts to rape her.

The end of the story could be seen as an endorsement of Florida’s attitude. When both her husband and her lover die—they are both engaged in the wars in Spain against the Moors—Florida decides to end her days in a convent: “Thus she took Him as a lover and as spouse who had delivered her from the violent love of Amador and from the misery of her life with her earthly husband” (Heptaméron 157, trans., 153; prenant pour mary et amy celuy qui l’avoit delivré d’une amour si vehemente que celle
d’Amadour, et de l’ennuy si grand que de la compagnie d’un tel mary). Florida’s vocabulary, which uses the mystic discourse of love, or more generally the early Christian configuration of the “Bride of Christ”, making earthly relations images of a heavenly order, nevertheless point to a social reality.\textsuperscript{46} To love God instead of an earthly lover or husband is a way for women to be more than objects of possession in feudal patriarchy, which becomes evident in the following discussion of this novella.

Hircan, who represents the view of the feudal lord, argues that Amador only tried to fulfill his duty when he attempted to rape Florida, whereupon Lady Oisille, the oldest and most authoritative storyteller, asks: “Do you call it duty when a man who devotes himself to a lady’s service tries to take her by force, when what he owes to her is obedience and reverence?” (\textit{Heptaméron} 158, trans., 153; Appellez-vous faire son devoir à un serviteur, qui veut avoir par force sa maistresse, à laquelle il doit toute reverence et obeissance?) However, it is not at all a given that Oisille, the group’s spiritual leader, should defend the courtly code. Later on it becomes clear that she advocates Christian marriage, which also has been seen has as “the most highly praised” by Marguerite.\textsuperscript{47} At all events the different voices constitute a discursive battlefield, which is revealing of the power relations not only between the Christian and Platonic, or courtly versions of love, but also between the sexes.

The “warrior-gallant ethic” is not a simple opposite of the Christian, Platonic or courtly love, and Parlamente even suggests that Florida’s defence of her virtue may be exaggerated, begging the women in the group to “be less harsh” (\textit{Heptaméron} 158, trans., 152; diminuer un peu de sa cruauté). What one can say is that the author invites to an open discussion. On one hand we have Florida’s defence of her virtue represented as a protection of her own integrity as well as of her honour. On the other hand this traditional subject position for a woman in the feudal order is represented as a pure convention or a symbolic game, as Saffredent explains it:

When our ladies are holding court and sit in state like judges, then we men bend our knees before them. […] However, in private it is quite another matter. Then Love is the only judge of the way we behave, and we soon find out that they are just women, and we are just men. The title “lady” is soon exchanged for “mistress”, and her “devoted servant” soon becomes her “lover”. Hence the well-known proverb: “loyal service makes the servant master”.

quand noz maistresses tiennent leur rang en chambre ou en salles, assises à leur aise comme noz juges, nous sommes à genou lx devant elles […]. Mais
quand nous sommes à part, où l’amour seul est juge de noz contenances,
nous sçavons tresbien qu’elles sont femmes, et nous hommes, et à l’heure
le nom de maistresse, est converty en amye, et le nom de serviteur en amy.
C’est de là où le proverbe est dict: “De bien servir et loyal estre, de ser-
viteur on devient maistre.”

(Heptaméron 158–59, trans., 153)

In this perspective love is represented as an arena where power
relations are acted out. Through sexual fulfilment the lady’s servant
becomes master, as parfaict amans she is his maîtresse, and power is just
about giving or not giving her love (which is her honour) away. In other
words the lady has the power as long as she masters its forces. If she lets
love be “the only judge” she loses that power, and her position is degraded
according to the social rules of the feudal order. Through this social and
courtly game Marguerite demonstrates the ritual but at the same time
unstable character of the power relations among the storytellers. This is
also a strategy which undermines the stability of the discursive order,
creating a real polyphony.

Coda

Medieval and early modern discourses of love no doubt reflect a
patriarchal order. Love as such, however, appears to be a word that can be
used to maintain or deconstruct its dominant configurations. In female
writers’ texts we see how the dream of pure love (fin’amors) as well as
that of sexual union (folle amour) reveal social power relations as well as
the lack that is constituent of desire, which in a male hegemonic order
configures the woman as both its cause and promise of completion. A
feminine desire can in this context not be sought in the interior of a
presupposed female psyche, it can only to be traced in the movement of
discourse itself.

Notes
1 Francesco Petrarca, Prose, edited by Guido Martellotti (Milan: Storia e testi,
1955), 132; The Secret, edited by Carol E. Quillen, trans. William Draper (New
York: Bedford/St Martin’s, 2003), 104.
2 For a summary of this research see R. Howard Bloch, Medieval Misogyny and
the Invention of Western Romantic Love (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1991), 81–91. See also George Duby, Le chevalier, la femme et le prêtre: Le
3 Bloch, Medieval Misogyny, 88.
4 See Bloch’s summary ibid., 86. See also Régine Pernoud, La femme aux temps des cathédrales (Paris 1980), 25.
5 Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 32. Foucault is indeed discussing the critic’s liberty (his own) “to describe the interplay of relations” within and outside “the space in which discursive events are deployed”. I think that this position is applicable to the writers studied in this article too.
6 Even if there is a misogynistic grounding of the medieval division of love and of its object into idealized or debased forms, and that its “function was from the start, and continues to be, the diversion of women from history by the annihilation of the identity of individual women”, I argue that this function is effaced by medieval and early modern women writers who by all evidence play a role in history if we read them. Bloch, Medieval Misogyny, 196–97.
7 A classical example at the beginning of Plato’s Symposium is the story of the two goddesses, who are both named Aphrodite, the Heavenly and the Popular. In the Christian tradition Eve stands for earthly, sinful love while Mary bears the promise of man’s salvation. See Bloch’s critical assessment of the contradictory configuration of love and of its object in the western history of sexuality in Medieval Misogyny.
9 Ibid., 184.
11 Jean-Charles Huchet, L’amour discourtois: La “Fin’amors” chez les premiers troubadours (Toulouse: Privat, 1987), 13. I agree with Huchet on the point that it is important for the understanding of courtly love not to confuse it with love as such (what ever that is) but to regard it as a discourse: “sortir de cette confusion entre l’amour tel qu’il fut vécu par les hommes et les femmes du XIe siècle et le discours sur l’amour qu’une minorité éclairée a articulé à la même époque”, Huchet, L’amour discourtois, 16–17.
12 Cited in Bloch, Medieval Misogyny, 158. See also Pierre Bec, Burlesque et obscénité chez les troubadours: Le contre-texte au Moyen Age (Paris, 1984), 7–22. Bec underlines that the “contre-text” is always within the literary code but with different types of relations to its paradigm. In this sense he also defines some twenty texts by women troubadours as counter-texts. What I am concerned with here is the dialectical movement between veneration and misogyny in the masculine texts and counter-texts.
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at face value. As "a fictive construct of Gaston Paris’s nineteenth-century medievalism" it has been vividly debated among medievalist during the last few decades. See Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 88.

15 Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 287.
17 From a Lacanian perspective it is the child’s introduction into the symbolic (language and culture) that constitutes this lack, or as Judith Feher-Gurewich puts it, the determining factor is the constitution of the subject through “a net of signifiers, whose function is to define a limit, or lack, from where desire for what is radically other than oneself can emerge,” “Lacan and American Feminism: Who is the Analyst?” in Beyond French Feminisms: Debates on Women, Politics, and Culture in France, 1981–2001, edited by Roger Célestin, Eliane DalMolin, and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 244.
18 Huchet, *L’amour discourtois*, 104.
23 Ibid.
24 See Burns *et al.*, “Feminism”, 229. I rather consider idealization in courtly literature as a statement drawing on Foucault’s definition of that which “circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation or rivalry,” in *Archaeology*, 118.
27 Started c.1230 by Guillaume de Lorris and completed c. 1270 by Jean de Meun, the *Roman de la rose* incorporates a radical change from courtly love and its idealization of the Lady to an openly misogynistic attitude towards women.

On a discursive level I think it is fruitful to understand Christine’s dialogical technique as reflective of scholastic disputation based on the belief that “it is not the truth which brings an end to the confrontation of languages, but merely the force of one of them”, with Roland Barthes’ formula. Cited in Holsinger, The Pre-modern Condition, 179. But she also used the dialectical movement in order “to transcend the limitations of dialectic—itself so central in medieval philosophy”, as Richards suggests in his introduction to Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan, 8.


Ibid., 145, note 961.

Jean de Meun, Le roman de la rose, 273.


The quotation and translation are from Bloch, Medieval Misogyny, 51.

Christine de Pizan, La Città delle Dames, 40.

The common argument that Christine disapproved of courtly love is, as far as I can see, a simplification and a misunderstanding of Christine’s discursive strategies. See for example Charity Cannon Willard, Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Work (New York: Persea Books, 1984) 59–70.

Julia Kristeva, Tales of Love, 296.


As Sarah Kay points out, “the Lady addressed (or constructed) by courtly rhetoric is, like Mary, ‘alone of all her sex’”, and that the medieval cult of Mary is “both influencing, and influenced by, that of the courtly Lady”, in Courtly Contradictions, 180.


Patricia F. Cholakian claims that this episode is based on Marguerite’s own experience. What is sure is that rape still is a reality in many sexual relations, but the novella is clearly situated in a discussion of true love, in *Marguerite de Navarre, Mother of the Renaissance*, (New York 2006), 21.

As Bernard points out, “her tales do not constitute a theoretical treatise on love but rather a realistic portrayal of its various aspects”, “Myth or Reality,” 4.

Bernard’s claims that “we find in the *Heptameron* an accurate account of the demise of the Platonic ideal and in its place not only an apology for marriage but also a witty and malicious parody of Platonic love,” “Platonism—Myth or Reality in the Heptameron?”, 4.

### Bibliography


