



Visitors, Jindra Husarikova

City of Ladies

*Books will for all time to come
keep my memory alive before
princes and the whole world.*

Christine de Pisan, 1405

MANY HISTORIANS CONSIDER her to be history's first feminist.

She was the official court historian to a king, a patron of princes, advisor to knights and royalty, and possibly the first woman in history to earn her living through writing.

And yet, how many people today have ever heard the name *Christine de Pisan*?

Born in 1364 in Venice, de Pisan had a privileged upbringing in Paris. Her father was appointed court physician and astrologer to the French king Charles V the following year, and over his wife's protests, insisted that her education not be limited simply because she was a female, as was almost universally the case at the time.

Upon reaching the marriageable age of 15, Christine was wedded to Etienne de Castel. She was fortunate in that her husband was supportive of her educational and writing endeavors, but when Etienne died suddenly in 1389 (probably a victim of the plague) corruption and the lack of rights for widows prevented her from recovering the property or unpaid wages due to her husband.

Christine's father had also died a year earlier, and with no way to support herself and her three young children and mother, de Pisan was faced with financial ruin.

She started writing initially as a way of easing her grief over her husband's death. Recalling this time of personal difficulty, she wrote poetically, "It is very difficult to keep one's pain bottled up.... Fortune could not hurt me so deeply as to to keep me from having the company of the poets' muses."

By 1403, De Pisan's romantic prose and poetry had attracted favorable attention from the royal court, and she was appointed the official biographer of Charles VI, becoming the first female court historian.

Her initial work consisted of histories, manuals on virtue and good governance, and other topics of interest to the royalty—along with poems and prose, romances, and other fare popular among the French nobility.

De Pisan had always been an avid reader, first working her way through history and then moving on to science, philosophy, and various other disciplines, and her access to the court's vast library allowed her to carry on with her self-education.

Although her writing for the court dealt mostly with traditional themes of romantic poetry—featuring, for example, a young female narrator either in love with a prince or mourning the loss of her lover—de Pisan's writing from the start incorporated her insistence on removing the typically misogynistic elements of the genre.

In the first of her two most famous works, *The Tale of the Rose* (1402), de Pisan took up arms against the “vulgar, immoral, and slanderous” manner in which women were depicted in Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose*, which characterized them as little more than deceitful seducers of men.

De Pisan's strident condemnation of de Meun's extremely popular work, along with her equally controversial follow-up, *Letters on the Debate of the Rose*, sparked a spirited debate among the upper class as to the proper place of women in polite society.

Three years later, de Pisan published *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405)—a truly revolutionary work, not only for its unprecedented vindication of the rights of women but for its brilliant composition.

Based loosely on St Augustine's widely read *City of God*, the lengthy prose work is presented in the form of a ‘dream-vision’ in which the narrator, de Pisan, is visited by three allegorical virtues: Reason, Rectitude and Justice. The muses instruct her to build a metaphorical fortified city (in essence, the book itself) to house a group of 36 historical heroines ranging from Mary Magdalene to the Queen of Sheba, in order to defend women against attack from men.

The Treasure of the City of the Ladies (or *Book of the Three Virtues*) followed that same year, and elaborated on similar themes, featuring a further 92 historical and mythological characters like Helen of Troy.

In order to preserve her privileged position, de Pisan had generally taken care to flatter the court, but in 1412, as increasing division in the French nobility threatened civil war, she began openly criticizing royal powers, shaming them for their poor governance.

Three years after the French lost the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, de Pisan was forced to flee Paris and seek refuge in the Poissy monastery, where her daughter was a nun. “Enclosed here because of treachery,” she wrote her final work, *The Song of Joan of Arc* (1429), after the Maid of Orleans' celebrated military victory over the English. It was the only literary work to honor Joan of Arc during her brief, tragic lifetime.

De Pisan died in 1430 at age 66, having gained widespread fame throughout Europe.

Along with many of her own heroines like Joan of Arc, de Pisan was featured in Judy Chicago's famous 1979 art installation, *The Dinner Party*. Living at a time when great self-confidence and daring were required for a woman to make her mark in a world dominated by men, through her writing she indeed set a place for herself in history. ■