“A souerayne chastyte”
Zenobia as Metaphor of the Educated Woman in Pizan and Elyot with Excursions into Boccaccio, Chaucer, Erasmus

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Submitted by
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Abstract

The Zenobia figure is the mainstay of the defence of women’s education in the transition period from the medieval to the modern. While works where Zenobia’s name and history appear have elicited attention from scholars, the question of why Zenobia has figured in western letters from Boccaccio to Elyot and beyond has rarely been asked. The present study seeks the answer to that question. It argues that the reason the defence of women’s education crystallised in Zenobia is that she was a widow, and moreover a queen who had access to the public sphere and the means of relatively free circulation in it. The fact that those means were military and political enabled later defenders of women’s education to elaborate on the public uses of educating women. Thus the figure of Zenobia is the crux of issues concerning women’s education in the transition from the medieval to the early modern. The itinerary of continuity and difference in this dissertation pursues its object in the following works: Giovanni Boccaccio’s De claris mulieribus (c.1361-75), Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Monkes Tale (c.1372-80), Christine de Pizan’s Le livre de la cité des dames (c.1405), Desiderius Erasmus’ Vidua Christiana (1529), Sir Thomas Elyot’s The Defence of Good Women (1540). Chapters studying these works are preceded by an overview of women’s education between the years 1350-1550, in order to point out under what circumstances the authors wrote about the education of women. A separate chapter is devoted to Pizan’s life since the content of her works, besides revealing her involvement with the political and social events of her time, derived directly from her life, and in many ways, Pizan’s biography itself overlapped with and informed her interpretation of the Zenobia figure. The Epilogue consists of a brief look forward in history and describes the dimensions the Zenobia story would attain in England after Elyot.
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1. Introduction: On the Threshold between the Medieval and the Early Modern

‘Continuity’ [...] speaks to the understanding of why certain cultural paths were taken, to the tracing of their routes, winding and forking as they were, and to some grasp of where they led—and still lead. It does not assume similarities—far less identities—of ‘concept’, ‘method’, ‘logic’ or whatever from one time to another. Continuity does suppose that the one(s) came from the other(s). It does suppose that we can know how and why they did, and to what effect. In this regard, it can and does just as powerfully concern differences, provided it enables us to see how such differences came about, what they meant and mean, what they did and continue to do.¹

Actually, the above passage from Timothy J. Reiss’ Knowledge, Discovery and Imagination in Early Modern Europe makes it superfluous to write an introduction to a study that traces the figure of Zenobia from Boccaccio through Thomas Elyot and beyond. Continuity here is used in the sense that authors employ other texts in terms of content and form. But continuity occurs not only with the usage of direct quotations or allusions to previous works but also with re-visions, re-assumptions, re-writings of the previous notions and forms and their adaptation to contemporary socio-cultural history. Thus, every work is ‘original’ as much as it continues the previous ones.

The itinerary of continuity and difference in this dissertation pursues its object in the following works: Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* (c.1361-75), Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Monkes Tale* (c.1372-80), Christine de Pizan’s *Le livre de la cité des dames* (c.1405), Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Defence of Good Women* (1540). The depiction of Queen Zenobia is traced in these works. The first account of Zenobia taken is in Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, since generally this work provides the information about the ancient queen in European culture. The second account comes from Chaucer in *The Monkes Tale*, as it is one of the earliest examples of the employment of Boccaccio and it provides a source for the subsequent authors. Then follows Pizan’s version of the Zenobia story in her *Cité des dames*. Before examining Sir Thomas Elyot’s Zenobia in his *The Defence of Good Women*, we take a look at the humanist Erasmus’ Judith texts.

I argue that each of the authors mentioned above leans on the previous texts and thus each version of the Zenobia story is a continuation of the previous version(s). In order to figure out how and why new versions of the Zenobia story were written, this study takes into consideration the differences between the texts, while providing how such differences came about, what they mean, and for what purpose they were accomplished. However, Pizan and Elyot’s depiction of Queen Zenobia differs from the other authors’ at a specific point, namely where they employed the figure of the ancient queen as that of the educated woman. Despite the 135 years intervening between the two works, both authors criticise and comment on the same cultural problem. We see Pizan as the forerunner of the ideas about
the education of women that would precipitate in Elyot. The similarity becomes all the more noteworthy when one takes into consideration the general classification of Pizan as a medieval writer whereas Elyot is described as an early-modern author. Thus the similarities also compel us to question the category of periodisation and its applicability to cultural history. As H. G. Koenigsberger argues, “periodization is a historiographic tool, a method used by historians to order and comprehend their material, and not a pattern inherent in the historical process itself, nor a divine plan imposed on mankind by God.”² Though historians propose different types of periodisation, they generally agree that the Middle Ages ended around 1500, and they sharply separate the Middle Ages from the modern period.³ At least in the handling of the issue concerning the education of women, this sharp separation does not work.

It is my thesis that the Zenobia figure is the mainstay of the defence of women’s education in the transition period from the medieval to the modern. While works where Zenobia’s name and history appear have elicited attention from scholars, the question of why Zenobia has figured in western letters from Boccaccio to Elyot and beyond has rarely been asked. The present study seeks the answer to that question. It argues that the reason the defence of women’s education crystallised in Zenobia is that she was a


widow, and moreover a queen who had access to the public sphere and the means of relatively free circulation in it. The fact that those means were military and political enabled later defenders of women’s education to elaborate on the public uses of educating women.

The chapter immediately following below, “Women’s Education 1350-1550” investigates the late medieval and early modern conceptions of education in order to describe extant educational systems in general and the education of women in particular. The education of women in the period 1350-1550, roughly spanning Pizan’s birth and Elyot’s death, had to be researched in order to understand whether women were educated or not, and if they were, how and to what extent. This background study was necessary for pointing out under what circumstances the authors wrote about the education of women. This study also enabled viewing what Pizan herself may have studied and the tradition against which she emerged as an ‘authoress’. Women were educated either by apprenticeship, private tutoring or formal schooling between the years 1350-1550. But the particular education pursued was determined by class and affordability. Yet we shall see that the attitude toward women did not change within these two centuries; marriage, children and household duties were still seen as coming prior to education. The period of widowhood, however, would provide an exceptional state enabling women’s entrance to the public sphere, thereby justifying their education.

Chapter 3 consists of an overview of the figure of Zenobia as depicted by Giovanni Boccaccio in De claris mulieribus (c.1361-75) and Geoffrey
Chaucer in *The Monkes Tale* (c.1372-80). Later authors would assimilate and comment on the ancient Queen from Boccaccio’s account, and Chaucer is one of the earliest examples of such assimilation. In general, Boccaccio praises Zenobia—both her warrior character and learnedness—but he considers her an exception among women and thus, in praising her, undermines women in general. Boccaccio focuses on Zenobia’s warrior character and her chastity, and only briefly mentions her personality and learnedness. Unlike Boccaccio’s encyclopaedic—historical and biographical—account, Chaucer depicts Zenobia’s story as the narrative of a ‘tragic fall’. Since his main concern is the *peripeteia*, the reversal of fortune from prosperity to ruin in Zenobia’s life, we see Chaucer excluding the details of Boccaccio’s account as these were not relevant to pathos.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Christine de Pizan’s life (1364-c.1430) since the content of her works, besides revealing her involvement with the political and social events of her time, derived directly from her life, and in many ways, Pizan’s biography itself overlapped with and informed her interpretation of the Zenobia figure. This transfusion of autobiography and conventional text is taken up in Chapter 5, which concentrates on Pizan’s version of the Zenobia story in her *Cité des dames* (c.1405). Although it is evident that Pizan’s version of the ancient queen’s story derives from Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, Pizan radically deviates from her source especially in the sense that she elaborates on the topic of Zenobia’s education and thereby creates the historic ‘threshold’ text which will
henceforward serve as the jumping-off ground for the defence of women’s education.

With Pizan’s Zenobia, an alternate identity to the nun’s or the wife’s had been created for women. Since women were directed at the private or domestic sphere rather than the public sphere, they were not encouraged to study. The state of widowhood, however, made it necessary to ‘educate’ women because in that state, women themselves had to govern their households. Thus Pizan, herself early a widow, stressed the learnedness of the ancient queen. As a widow, Pizan’s Zenobia, who had open circulation in the public sphere, deployed her learning in history, ethics and politics. Given the importance of widowhood to the defence of women’s education, Chapter 6 consists of Erasmus’ views on women, since the issue of the education of women precipitates into deeper crisis in Erasmus as he introduces the idea of a humanistic education for women. In this chapter, especially his division of women into three categories—virgin, married woman, widow—has been taken into consideration. We shall see that Erasmus assigns importance to the widow among the three, considering her wider life experience, which includes the respective experience of the other two. He bases his argument on the fact that in the period of widowhood women maintain access to the public sphere and need to be prepared for it. Erasmus’ depiction of Judith in Vidua Christiana (1529) as the example of an ‘ideal’ widow gains importance since I argue that ‘Judith’ is Erasmus’ version of ‘Zenobia’.
Chapter 7 analyses Elyot’s dialogue *The Defence of Good Women* (1540), in which Zenobia is one of the three speakers. The importance of Elyot’s depiction of Zenobia is that the queen here finds embodiment as a *speaker* and becomes an interlocutor in the dialogue as she herself tells of her life and experience while other, previous accounts were biographical and historical and narrate *of* Zenobia. In the dialogue, Zenobia speaks of her reign and her success, and of how she utilised her learning throughout her life. Elyot depicts Zenobia as a learned widow and relates her success in reigning her country to the education she had attained.

The “Epilogue” consists of a brief look forward in history and describes the dimensions the Zenobia story would attain in England after Elyot. These dimensions were going to attain ‘reality’ when the impeccably educated Elizabeth ascended the English throne. Elizabeth was not a widow, but she was the perpetual virgin, which, by the second half of the sixteenth century, would come to mean the same thing. Nevertheless, the figure ‘Zenobia’ was going to continue its function in the discourse on women’s education as we shall see below in relation to the work of George Pettie in 1576. But in every context where this figure appeared, she would preserve the distantiating pun on * xenos*, stranger and outsider, in her name.
2. Women’s Education 1350-1550

Hast thou children? Educate them.  
Ecclesiasticus 7:25

An eloquent woman is never chaste; and the behaviour of many learned women confirms [this] truth.  
Niccolò Barbo

A fresco in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice depicts four stages in human life: ‘the period of childhood and games’, ‘the period of study’, ‘the period of love, courtship and knighthood’ and ‘the adulthood period’. ¹ ‘The period of childhood and games’ is symbolised by boys and girls playing with a windmill, a doll, birds, a toy horse, and a rope. In ‘the period of study’ the boys, holding books, are learning to read and write while the girls are learning to weave. The third period, ‘the period of love, courtship and knighthood’, is represented with a feast in which young men and women are depicted together in garden and hunting scenes. The last one, ‘the adulthood period’, is identified with the jurist and the scientist, bearded and wearing professional garments. While in the stage of childhood the sexes are shown mingling and playing at the same things, ‘the period of study’ clearly marks the separation of boys and girls in terms of kind of activity. While boys are

¹ Paolo (Caliari) Veronese, (Jacobo Robusti) Tintoretto and their assistants decorated the Palazzo Ducale (the Doge’s Palace) in Venice in the sixteenth century. The Palazzo was established in about 810, but the exterior structure was changed in the fourteenth century. The interior, which was destroyed by a series of fires, was largely rebuilt and decorated in the sixteenth century. It is known that Veronese was sent for c.1553 for the interior decoration but it was not completed until 1885. The artist of the fresco discussed here is unknown. For the description and discussion of the fresco, see Shulamith Shahar, The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages, trans. Chaya Galai (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 119-20.
learning how to read and write, girls learn how to weave, which is essentially a kind of domestic skill. The title of the panel clearly implies that weaving belongs in a girl’s curriculum. Nevertheless, girls are still included in the scene.

The third period, ‘the period of love, courtship and knighthood’, which is represented by a feast in which young men and women are depicted together in a garden, describes the scene of finding a mate. Though women are included in the picture panel, they are there as objects of this stage of life. The designation of ‘the period of love, courtship and knighthood’ describes the phases of the young adult male. The fourth scene entirely excludes women; the men have evidently continued their education in universities and have been awarded with professional titles. Women have no part in the last stage called ‘the adulthood period’ in the fresco, mostly because by the time of adulthood, they would have already gotten married and would be raising children and performing household duties. Thus ‘the period of study’ which marks the separation of boys and girls in terms of sex also determines their respective roles in society. Already at this early stage, women were directed toward the domestic sphere rather than the public and thus ‘educated’ accordingly. Men are implicitly shown to have had the opportunity to become ‘learned’ and to study at advanced levels in order to join the public sphere. Important here for our subject is the fact that the Venetian fresco indicates educational opportunity for the woman only in the childhood stage. Further, it limits the area of education to an activity that does not include even basic literacy, but is directed at domestic chores.
The Palazzo’s fresco certainly does not give an idealised picture of women’s education in the late medieval and early modern period. Whether or not it reflects fact, is what we must explore now. But before looking at whether or not women were in fact educated beyond what this fresco shows; and if they were educated, to what extent, on what subjects, where, how and by whom, we ought to clarify what the idea of education meant for a woman in late medieval times. The education of women was understood as a preparation for life and, in general, it was a preparation for marriage, since, except nuns, very few women remained single in the Middle Ages. Marriage, the raising of children and household duties had priority over education, and the attitude toward women’s education did not change much between 1350 and 1550. Information concerning the education of women can be discerned from the accounts of contemporary chronicles, romances, didactic works that are addressed to women, or the writings of women themselves. But this chapter is mainly based on the historical material of the times, and scholars’ interpretations of this material, rather than the fictive works (poems, romances, etc.) which generally described the adored ‘lady’ and her intellectual and other accomplishments, and which were thus far removed from reflecting the ‘real’ attitude toward women and their education. Nevertheless, these fictive works are rich in supplying us with indications of educational notions in relation to women. For example, as Eileen Power points out, in Sir Thomas Malory’s (d.1471) Morte d’Arthur, “there is a passage where it is said of Arthur’s fairy sister Morgan le Fay, who bewitched Merlin, that ‘she was put to school in a nunnery and there
she learned so much [...]’. But in general it is not so easy as in Power’s example from Malory to distinguish, in medieval fiction, the part of the praise that owes to a lady’s ‘study’ from the part that addresses her general breeding. In other words, it is not possible to discern the ‘learning’ from ‘wisdom’ and ‘nourishment of the soul’: Chrétien de Troyes, for example, in the *Arthurian Romances* composed in the late twelfth century, describes the accomplishments of Erec’s wife in a way that renders instruction (“sensibly spoken”) inseparable from birth and breeding (“fine character”):

[Enide] was so charming, honourable, sensibly spoken and welcoming, pleasant and friendly in her manner. [...] She was so versed in good manners that she had her share of all the virtues any lady can possess, of generosity and of wisdom. [...] In neither the realm nor the empire was there a lady of such fine character.

Thus there is a separation of fictive works and historical material in this chapter. We should point out from the start that once we limit research to historical document, rather than fictional ideal, there remains rather little to work with.

The early education which both male and female children received was, of course, primarily from their mothers and other women around them. At a certain age, however, a child could start attending school or similar kind of formal education. Of course, if sufficiently wealthy, a family could engage a private tutor or tutors for the child, but most medieval children who received

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formal primary education started schooling some time between ages six and twelve. For example, Jean Froissart (c.1337-c.1410), the French chronicler, started formal schooling at age twelve; Christine de Pizan’s (1364-c.1430) son began at age thirteen, while Laura Cereta (1469-1499) started school at age seven. There is a record of a 1390 London girl who started school at age eight, and a German girl is recorded as having begun at age seven. Just as there was no standard age for starting primary education, there was no standard type of formal schooling at this stage of education. Cereta attended a convent school; the London girl an elementary school; the German girl went to a school of the order of the Beguines, while Pizan’s son was sent to the court of the Earl of Salisbury in England. (We do not know the kind of school Froissart attended.)

The type of education the child received or had the opportunity to receive, mostly depended on the social class to which the family belonged, regardless of the child’s sex. The children of the nobility and upper middle class were tutored at home. For example, Cereta, who was the daughter of an attorney and magistrate in Brescia, was tutored at home in mathematics after two years of convent schooling. Froissart, son of an affluent

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7 Cereta, Collected Letters, p. 47.
businessman in Valenciennes, probably received tutoring in various subjects before he was sent to school.\(^8\) Another educational mode, available to children of the affluent, was being sent to noble households, or courts, as we have seen Pizan doing with her son.\(^9\) It is hard to discover what boys or girls acquired in terms of intellectual education in such households, where girls were placed with ladies, boys with lords. But, among the aims of this educational ‘method’, the most important one was to enable the young to acquire manners and principles of conduct appropriate to their class. Skills like spinning, weaving, the making of clothes, which were practised by most women, and household management were also taught to girls in this framework.\(^{10}\)

The education children received at noble households or courts may be viewed as a kind of apprenticeship, which may be called ‘courtly apprenticeship’. Though different in the content of training from this ‘courtly apprenticeship’, apprenticeship was also available for middle-class children. Children of craftsmen entered apprenticeship between the ages of


fourteen and eighteen.\textsuperscript{11} Within the period of apprenticeship, they probably learned how to keep accounts, at least to recognise, if not to read, legal documents in Latin, and to read in their vernacular language. Girls learned such trades as embroidery, dressmaking, silk-thread making, brewing, and polishing and finishing various items for trade such as gold and silver vessels.\textsuperscript{12} Girls received training in manners and morals, as well as a trade. Usually they were apprenticed to the wife of a craftsman. For most young women, completing an apprenticeship provided an extra attraction for potential husbands. Besides earning a dowry—which all women, or rather, their families, had to pay the groom throughout the Middle Ages both in northern and southern Europe—they could thereby also possibly offer a side business to supplement the income of the household. If not married, as \textit{femmes soles}, women also had the opportunity to carry on their own business.

Sex distinction occurs when we come to formal schooling of the type convent schools (for girls) and monastic schools (for boys). Though we have records of boys attending convent schools, these essentially taught


\textsuperscript{12} For girls who were taken into apprenticeship, see for example, A. H. Thomas, ed., \textit{Calendar of Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London, 1323-1364} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), pp. 219, 274. These municipal records reveal some of the details of arrangements made for the apprenticeship, such as the money charged and on what it would be spent.
Convent school education was available for girls who belonged to the nobility and upper middle class for the simple reason that the fees were high. One could attend a convent school even though she did not intend to be a nun. Convents (or nunneries) were of course widespread but not all of them kept schools. When they did, the schools were rarely large and usually took girls, very few in number, as boarders. Some convents themselves were poor and small so that they could not look after any pupils. Besides the size, and therefore availability of the convent schools, expenses also limited the possibility of receiving convent education. The nuns charged fees for board and tuition, which, as said, were high. And thus, this form of education remained available to the daughters of upper classes.

The quality of education greatly varied among convent schools, especially because of the varying intellectual level of the nuns themselves. It varied, over time, even in a given school. Generally, the intellectual standards were quite high in the early centuries of the Middle Ages, but in the later centuries (roughly after the thirteenth century) the educational level of the nuns themselves grew progressively worse. According to the Rule for Nuns (written c.512-534) by Caesarius of Arles, in which the regulations of community life for nuns are enumerated, “no little girl shall ever be taken into the monastery, until she is six or seven years old, able to learn read and

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13 There are references to boys in reports of episcopal visitations to nunneries. As late as 1527, the will of one Sir John Stanley indicates the wish that his son should be brought up by the Abbess of Barking until the age of twelve and then by the Abbot of Westminster. See Eileen Power, Medieval English Nunneries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 263.

14 For the decreasing level of education of nuns, see Power, Medieval Women, pp. 74, 88-90; Shahar, Fourth Estate, pp. 50-52.
write and to obey the rules.” At the time of Caesarius, reading and writing were seen as compulsory, which meant there existed plenty of nuns who could instruct in both. Seven centuries later on the other hand, in the rule Clare of Assisi wrote for her convent in 1253, which was also the first religious rule written by a woman, she distinguished nuns who were able to read from those who were not, in the context of telling them how to pray: “the sisters who can read shall celebrate the Divine office [...] [but] those who do not know how to read shall say twenty-four Our Father’s for Matins, [...].” Although Caesarius’ rule was adopted in various forms by a number of prominent convents in early medieval Europe, it is clear that, for example, in the convent of the Church of San Damiano, of which Clare of Assisi made leadership, having the ability of reading and writing was neither compulsory nor assumed. It is not certain that this convent also had a school, but the lack of reading knowledge was the case for most of the convents especially after the thirteenth century, and writing had become even rarer. Also it is not known whether or not a convent kept a school when there were no learned nuns, but we may surmise that convents sometimes only provided some basic training for girls that would help them in domestic life.


17 For the progressive erosion of reading and writing knowledge among nuns, see Power, Medieval Women, pp. 74, 88-90; Shahar, Fourth Estate, pp. 50-52.
In the convents children were, doubtless, made to memorise the Credo, the Paternoster and some psalms, and must have been taught to read. Despite Caesarius’ inclusion of both reading and writing, it is doubtful whether they learned to write. The language in which they learned to read—and write—is also uncertain, since, for example in England, even starting from the fourteenth century there are bishops writing in French to nuns, not in Latin. But most probably girls could read prayer books or poetry and tales in their vernacular languages, which provided a sort of guidance to women. The curricula scholars draw for the convent schools vary widely since there is no direct evidence as to what exactly was studied. Thus, if we would draw up the most comprehensive curriculum, synthesising scholars’ different findings, girls were taught needlework, medicine—which most women were expected to know, but they were not allowed to practice it outside their homes—and some special skills such as weaving, painting, sculpture, manuscript production and illumination, and printing.

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18 Power, Medieval Women, pp. 88-89.

19 Visual artistic knowledge and education were generally widespread around Italy, not in all Europe. There were nunneries famous for their manuscript illuminations even starting with the thirteenth century in Italy. Power, in Medieval Women (p. 74), points out that in the seventeenth century, John Aubrey claimed that medieval girls were taught needlework, writing and drawing, whereas in the middle of the nineteenth century, scholars claimed they learned embroidery and confectionery as activities; and reading, writing and some knowledge of arithmetic as main subjects of study. See also Shahar, Fourth Estate, p. 50.
Another kind of early formal education was provided by ‘elementary schools’, which were mostly available to both sexes in the towns. These elementary schools were supported by local governments, and girls of poor families also had the opportunity to attend them. They did not exactly specialise in teaching the art of the Latin language as did the grammar schools which we are going to look at later, but rather provided instruction in basic reading and writing, and arithmetic calculations. In Italy by the thirteenth century, and elsewhere in Europe after 1300, most cities supported elementary schools, some of which were mixed. Jean Froissart, who was born in Valenciennes in Flanders, writes of the mixed school he attended when he was twelve years old, in 1449. According to Froissart, not only did girls attend his school, but both boys and girls studied Latin. He writes of his relations with the girls and describes how he fell in love with a girl whom he saw sitting and reading a book under a tree.

But although this is evidence that boys and girls were taught together, it is not certain whether the school Froissart tells of is a convent school or an elementary school. On the other hand, at Paris there were the so-called ‘little schools’ under the government of the Cantor of Notre Dame, which taught reading and rudiments of Latin grammar, and which admitted girls as well as boys. We may assume that the ‘little school’ was the Parisian version of

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the medieval elementary school. One Paris lay schoolmistress who kept such a school in 1292 is on record.22 (Paris was not unique in hosting lay mistresses: at the beginning of the fourteenth century, a woman teacher named Clementina, who taught Latin in Florence, is recorded.23) In the same fourteenth century, it is recorded that when summoning assemblies of teachers of the ‘little schools’ in Paris, women keeping and teaching schools in the art of grammar were also included. In 1380, in Paris, twenty-one schoolmistresses were registered with masters.24 From Italian merchants’ chronicles, it is known that the sons, and some daughters, of wealthy Italian merchants learned to read and do basic arithmetical calculations in elementary schools. Later they studied the classics in Latin, including Cicero and Aristotle, but also read Dante’s vernacular works. This is understandable, because it was essential, especially by the fourteenth century, that any merchant should be able to read and preferably write not only in the native language but also in one of the international languages, like Latin.25

Despite the availability of elementary schools for girls, families usually preferred convent schools for their daughters’ education. For example,

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22 Cited in Power, Medieval Women, p. 75.


25 Italian merchants’ family chronicles, the ricordanze, give information about not only business matters but also educational and other ideas. For example, see Gene Brucker’s edition of and commentary on Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence: The Diaries of Buonaccorso Pitti and Gregorio Dati, trans. Julia Martines (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
Laura Cereta was sent to a convent school at the age of seven, in 1476, where she learned reading, writing, embroidery, and, from a learned nun, the rudiments of Latin. On the other hand, her brothers were sent to the prestigious humanist boarding school established by Giovanni Olivieri in Chiari and probably continued to the university. The situation would not have changed in the early modern era: according to a survey related to formal schools—other than convent schools—in Venice, in 1587-88, about a century after Cereta’s introduction to school, 4600 boys—one fourth of the school-age boys in the city—were receiving formal schooling, while there were only 30 girls.

Now, let us consider what lay beyond the point where girls were cut off from formal education according to our Venetian fresco. After elementary school, “the next level of education was the grammar school [...].” The grammar schools, which constituted a further, more advanced, step in elementary schooling, were bounded to either churches, or local governments, or (mainly after about 1300) universities. In grammar schools, boys learned how to read, write and speak the Latin tongue in the course of approximately seven years. The curriculum consisted of grammar, text analysis, and composition. The curriculum of Latin literacy taught in the schools was conceived as the ‘seven liberal arts’. The latter were composed

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26 See Diana Robin’s Introduction to Cereta’s Collected Letters, p. 5.


of two parts, namely the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. The first group was linguistic whereas the second mathematical; while the *trivium* consisted of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, the *quadrivium* included arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. Grammar schools ideally covered this seven-fold curriculum. But in fact, the ‘seven liberal arts’ were the conceptual division of sciences which medieval culture had inherited from Rome, rather than the actual curriculum: “The early Middle Ages inherited from late antiquity the scheme of the seven liberal arts that served not only for a comprehensive classification of human knowledge but also for the curriculum of the [...] schools,” writes Paul Oskar Kristeller. But the schools only “retained the formal structure” inherited from antiquity, and “kept alive the names of scholars such as Euclid and Ptolemy, even while their works were unknown.” But in practice, many medieval schools went no farther than grammar and rhetoric. Logic, the third subject of the *trivium*, was conceptually more sophisticated but it was usually studied in the simpler form of the dialectic. Grammar and rhetoric were compressed and the time spent on them shortened as more students entered the schools with some

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29 David L. Wagner’s edited book, *The Seven Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983; 1986), is one of the rare books in English that gives a comprehensive account of each of the seven arts comprising the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. The seven chapters devoted to the specific arts follow two introductory chapters, comprised of a historical survey and a study of the medieval motivations for studying liberal arts, and are followed by a final chapter explaining the process by which the liberal arts tradition was replaced by scholasticism.


31 Wagner, “The Seven Liberal Arts and Classical Scholarship,” in *The Seven Liberal Arts*, p. 25.
prior knowledge of Latin. Just as grammar was the basic discipline of the *trivium*, arithmetic was that of the *quadrivium*. Basic arithmetic, among the *quadrivium* subjects, was taught in the elementary schools, whereas the study of music was left to ‘song schools’ bounded to churches—to which girls were not admitted—and the study of geometry was left to the universities.

There is no evidence to show that girls ever attended the grammar school, which existed for boys.\(^{32}\) From grammar schools, boys might continue their education in universities. This higher educational path, including the preparation in a grammar school, was entirely closed to girls.\(^{33}\) This, we may venture to say, was mainly because obtaining a university degree meant being entitled to clerical orders—no matter what the subject studied was. It was precisely that entitlement which theologically and socially precluded women. Clerical entitlement, moreover, implied the right to preach, the possession of a public voice and the right publically to read and interpret the Bible.

Thus, with the development of universities in the thirteenth century, the period of academic study began to be recognised as a part of the young man’s life: a regulation issued in 1358, by the Dauphin of France, to the University of Paris begins directly by addressing “our beloved sons, the

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\(^{33}\) I have been able to locate, but not obtain a copy of, Michael H. Shank’s article entitled, “A Female University Student in Late Medieval Krakow” *[Signs]* 12 (Winter 1987): 373-81], which seems to document female attendance at Krakow University.
masters and scholars studying at Paris [...].”34 In 1200 there were four recognised universities in Europe.35 Paris was the largest, followed by Bologna, Oxford, and Salerno. In 1209, Cambridge had been established by the masters who had seceded from Oxford. However, the university movement spread slowly in England but rapidly progressed in Italy and France in the course of the thirteenth century, and university education expanded tremendously after 1300. There were about twenty universities throughout Europe by 1300, but seventy nine by 1500. Most were founded by municipalities or other public authorities. As more primary schools opened that gave elementary instruction in the Latin classics, the time spent on grammar and rhetoric in the universities was reduced, but logic was extended. Instruction was oral, which meant that the lecturer would read the relevant passages of the ancient authors and discuss them. There were generally four faculties; namely, arts, law, medicine, and theology. Law was the leading faculty in most of the universities and in some cases it was divided into civil and canon law. But on the other hand, the University of Paris, for example, had no faculty of civil law; it was rather concerned with theology.

34 Cited in Rowling, Everyday Life in Medieval Times, p. 149.

It is clear that medieval women were educated either by apprenticeship or formal schooling between the years 1350 and 1550. But, unlike men’s, their education was limited to primary schooling. It is also evident that like peasant men, peasant women did not receive any education. It can be said that women residing in towns had more educational opportunity than those who lived in the countryside. Women had the chance to attend a convent school even though they did not intend to be a nun, or they were educated either at their own homes by tutoring or in noble households. The technical education of apprenticeship was also open to women in towns, as well as education in the elementary schools. As we have seen, the track of formal education pursued was determined by class and affordability.

The spread of universities’ influence toward the ‘Renaissance’, and the new theory and practices introduced by the humanist conception of education did not change much in the case of women. Humanists of the sixteenth century—even Thomas More, whose daughters were highly educated—found only the Christian reading material suitable for women, whenever they agreed a woman should read.36 The early humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), in his letter to the Lady Battista Malatesta of Montefeltro, dated to 1424, not only explained his views on the education of women, but also drew up a curriculum for them:

Disciplines there are, of whose rudiments some knowledge is fitting [to women], yet whereof to obtain the mastery is a thing by no means glorious. In geometry and arithmetic, for example, […] I should seize her and tear her away from them. I should do the same in astrology,

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and even, perhaps, in the art of rhetoric. […] For why should the subtleties of the status, the epicheiremata, the kninomena, and a thousand other rhetorical conundrums consume the powers of a woman, who never sees the forum? […] So far is that [i.e., rhetoric] from being the concern of a woman […]. The contests of the forum, like those of warfare and battle, are the sphere of men. Hers is not the task of learning to speak for and against witnesses, for and against torture, for and against reputation; she will not practice the commonplaces. […] When, then, do I encourage her, when do I spur her on? Just when she devotes herself to divinity and moral philosophy. […] These two subjects, then, divinity and moral philosophy, will be her most important goals, the raisons d’être of her studies. Other subjects will be related to them in proportion as they contribute to them or to their embellishment. […] To the aforesaid there should be first joined, in my view, a knowledge of history [since] knowledge of the past gives guidance to our counsels and our practical judgement. […] The poets, too, I would have her read and understand [who] have many wise and useful things to say about life and how it should be lived […].

The arts which Bruni excludes from the attention of women are specifically the arts of the quadrivium (except music38), namely geometry, arithmetic, and astrology which were seen as subjects of the university, and by Bruni’s time, they had been entirely included in the university curriculum. He does not also allow women to acquire the knowledge of rhetoric, which would lead the way to public speech. Thus, he recommends that women should study history and poetry, which would enable them to

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38 As Kristeller points out, “musical theory retained during the Renaissance its status as one of the liberal arts,” rather than becoming one of the “arts” of the quadrivium. See Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts,” p. 180. But more importantly, in the fifteenth century in Italy, music was well on its way toward becoming a ‘fine art’ and hence would not be deemed too rigorous for a woman.
remain—in Isotta Nogarola’s words—in their “book-lined cells.” And an entire century after Bruni, Juan Luis Vives, in 1523, could, in his Instruction of a Christian Woman, reflect the general notion that, “as for eloquence, I have no great care, for woman needeth it not, but she needeth goodness and wisdom [...] If she be good, it were better to be at home and unknown to other folks, and in company to hold her tongue demurely, and let few see her, and none at all hear her.” This Vives passage comes from Richard Hyrde’s 1540 translation of the work into English. Although not as stern as the conclusion of Vives-Hyrde’s Instruction of a Christian Woman, most sixteenth-century intellectuals were not entirely condoning of learned women. Learning, which, by the sixteenth century, meant training in classical languages, philosophy, the sciences, theology, rhetoric, and history, was seen either as bespeaking a woman’s individual fulfilment or as the means to make her a better Christian. It was not conceived as a necessity. Against this background, Desiderius Erasmus’ ideas about the education of women, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, will be seen to provide the exception. Following Erasmus (1467-1536), Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546) too, appears unorthodox in this respect. But Pizan, who was born in 1364 and died c.1430, certainly emerges as the forerunner.

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In the period 1350-1550, roughly spanning Pizan’s birth and Elyot’s death, the suggestion of women’s education gave rise to the following questions: why should women learn Latin when they were excluded from attendance at universities and none of the professions that required it were open to women? Why did women need to read the Bible themselves? Why did women not make content with the education that provided training in domestic skills? The answer that impeded women’s education was that even acquiring reading and writing—although this did not involve any interference in public affairs in the case of a woman—would distract her from caring for her children and household. This was, of course, as Bruni underlined, related to women’s being directed to the private or domestic sphere rather than the public sphere. Thus the attitude toward women did not change within these two centuries (between 1350 and 1550); marriage, children and household duties were still seen as coming prior to education. Despite the emerging new humanist understanding of education at the end of the fifteenth century in Italy and France, and toward the second half of the sixteenth century in England, the humanist schools too were still not accessible to women.41 Female students at the new grammar schools employing the humanist curriculum were not to make substantial appearance before the end of the sixteenth century.

3. ‘Zenobia’ before 1400

Zenobia was the Queen of Palmyra in the third century.¹ Information about her character and reign in European culture generally derives from her depiction in Giovanni Boccaccio’s (1313-1375) De claris mulieribus (Concerning Famous Women).² In the book, Boccaccio assembled 104 brief biographies of “famous” women chronologically, of which some were mythical and others historical. Although most of the women Boccaccio wrote about were from Greece and Rome, the first story is about Eve and the last five are about medieval Christians. De claris mulieribus, dated c.1361-75, was written in Latin, like Boccaccio’s other encyclopaedic works, such as De casibus virorum illustrium (The Fates of Illustrious Men).³ Since De claris mulieribus is an encyclopaedic work, in which the stories are told chronologically, there are no narrators or story tellers and the

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¹ “Zenobia” is the Latinised form of Aramaic “Bat Zabbai.” Zenobia is also known as Septimia Zenobia Sebaste. She flourished c.260 AD as the Queen of Palmyra. Palmyra is an ancient city of central Syria, which is an oasis in the north of the Syrian Desert, midway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River, located 243 km. north-east of Damascus. It was called Palmyra by the Greeks and Romans, but the original name of the city is Tadmor, as which it is also known today. Tadmor means ‘the city of palm trees’. From about 1000 BC for approximately one millennium the city was an Assyrian caravan town and later became an important outpost of the Greek Empire for about two hundred years. In 217 AD it was annexed by Rome. Later, in 634 AD, the city was conquered by the Muslims and in 1089, it was totally destroyed by an earthquake.


accounts are given as historical fact. Later, in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer takes up Zenobia’s account from *De claris mulieribus*. The present chapter consists of an overview of the figure of Zenobia as depicted by Boccaccio and Chaucer, since it is from Boccaccio that later authors will assimilate and comment on the ancient Queen, and Chaucer is one of the earliest examples of such assimilation. The link between Boccaccio and Chaucer, whose texts were written before, and most probably available to Pizan and Elyot, will also help us determine how deviation occurs in each narrative.

In *De claris mulieribus*, Boccaccio derives information concerning Zenobia’s biography mostly from the *Historia Augusta* which is dated to the late fourth century. But Boccaccio deviates from his source in at least one significant respect. Our key to this deviation is best found, it seems, in the Venetian fresco discussed in the second chapter above. The third panel in that fresco, ‘the period of love, courtship and knighthood’, had starkly separated activities according to sex. While women were merely depicted as present in the courting scene, men were involved in other activities such as hunting. Zenobia’s character according to Boccaccio obliterates the division made in the Venetian fresco. He bases his vision of the character of the queen and her biography on her ‘masculine’ characteristics and activities. He goes even further, and creates a childhood for Zenobia that does not

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4 Boccaccio’s section 98, devoted to Zenobia, is closely modeled on section 15 of “Tyranni Triginta” in the *Historia Augusta*. Boccaccio re-arranges the contents of that section but preserves most of it and adds some details from other sections of the *Historia Augusta*. See Dennis J. O’Brien, “Warrior Queen: The Character of Zenobia According to Giovanni Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan and Sir Thomas Elyot,” *Medieval Perspectives* 8 (1993): 54.
exist in his source and locates Zenobia’s crossing of boundaries in her childhood: “From childhood [Zenobia] scorned all womanly exercises […]. Having thus overcome feminine softness, she was so strong that by her strength she surpassed the young men of her age in wrestling and all other contests” (226). He further compares Zenobia’s ‘masculine’ character with the character of men around her and writes that the Roman Emperor’s son Gallienus, “was languishing in his effeminacy” (226) while Zenobia was involved in manly affairs and proved successful in such activities as hunting. He also asserts that Zenobia, “often condemned [the] softness of [her stepson] Herodes” (227). Thus, according to Boccaccio’s description, which does not exist in his source, Zenobia’s character deviates from the expected role of woman.

Palmyra was a part of the Roman province of Syria, and Zenobia’s husband Septimius Odenathus was the supreme commander in charge of the defense of the eastern frontier under the Roman Emperor Gallienus. Though Zenobia “serve[d] under her husband,” she had her own army, and “it was believed that through [her] deeds Mesopotamia fell into her power” (226, 227). Odenathus had been killed in an argument while hunting and left Vabalathus, his son and heir, as ruler of Palmyra under the guidance of his mother Zenobia. Zenobia, who reigned as regent for Vabalathus in 267-273 AD, declared Palmyra’s independence after Odenathus’ murder. Within three years, she extended her rule to all of Syria, to Egypt, and to most of Asia Minor, ostensibly in alliance with Rome. When Emperor Gallienus’ successor Lucius Domitius Aurelian attempted to recover control of the
province, Zenobia at first asked Aurelian to declare her son the ‘Duke of the Romans’, to which Aurelian agreed. Later, she rebelled completely, setting herself up as Queen of an independent Palmyra free from bondage to Rome. At first, none of her enemies “dared try anything against her,” but in 271 Aurelian took up arms against Zenobia (227). After gaining control of nearly all of Zenobia’s domain, Aurelian, “a man of perfect virtue,” besieged the city of Palmyra (228). Zenobia, the “bitter enemy of Rome,” could not withstand the siege, only because “she lacked necessary supplies” (229). She was captured and taken to Rome and was forced to walk before a “chariot of gold and precious gems which [she herself] had built.” She wore not only her own “crown and royal robes,” but also golden chains as she walked in Aurelian’s triumphal parade (229). Despite the fact that she was thus humiliated, Aurelian allowed Zenobia to retire to “an estate near Tivoli” where “she grew old with her children, wearing private attire among Roman matrons” (229-30).

In the biography, besides mentioning all her ‘masculine’ strengths in both the physical and intellectual senses, Boccaccio asserts that the significant virtue of Zenobia was her chastity. Telling of her youth, he states that Zenobia “used to scorn the love and companionship of men and [that she] greatly valued virginity” (226). After she got married, she “never gave herself to her husband Odaenathus […] except to conceive children […]. But if she found she had not conceived, she would give herself her husband at his request.” Boccaccio clearly states his approval of Zenobia’s attitude: “How praiseworthy was this decision in a woman” (228). He praises
Zenobia and considers her as an exception among women. But as Dennis J. O’Brien points out, “Boccaccio’s general strategy for praising Zenobia involves dispraising other women” since Boccaccio also claims that “women having similar moral scruples [like those of Zenobia] are very rarely found” (228). Though he praises Zenobia, he does this by underestimating other women. In this respect Boccaccio is following his source, the Historia Augusta: Zenobia “assumed the imperial diadem and purple and ruled the empire in her [own two] sons’ name better than women are expected to do” (227). Hence, Boccaccio considered Zenobia different than other women, as an exception.

Zenobia’s personality and attitude are described very briefly in De claris mulieribus: “She was a sober woman” hiding her dark beauty, and “Generous with prudence” (227, 228). Boccaccio also tells of Zenobia’s learning: although “she spent most of her time hunting and bearing arms,” she also learned the histories of the cultures with which she was likely to come in contact. She learned the languages necessary for a leader in her day: in addition to her own language (unnamed, but probably a Semitic language), she became proficient in Latin, Egyptian and Syrian and “[she] learned Greek under the philosopher Longinus” (228). These languages, namely, Latin, Egyptian, Syrian and Greek were among the living languages in use in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire in the third century AD. Boccaccio mentions the languages by their names rather than saying ‘she learned many languages’ (as we will see later in this chapter, Chaucer omits

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the names of the languages) most probably, in order to increase the reliability of Zenobia’s biography, since this is an encyclopaedic work. Though not mentioned explicitly, ‘education’ in both history and language was intended for ruling her country and army.

Around ten years after Boccaccio’s De claris mulieribus, Zenobia’s story appears in The Monkes Tale in Chaucer’s (1343-1400) The Canterbury Tales.⁶ As is known, in The Canterbury Tales different English people—members of the minor nobility, the professions, religious orders, trades, and lower classes—on pilgrimage to Canterbury, tell stories. Twenty two of the twenty nine pilgrims tell stories, Chaucer himself being the only one to tell two. The Canterbury Tales is very much similar to Boccaccio’s Il decamerone (Decameron, 1349-51) in terms of plot, scheme and characterisation.⁷ As Brian Stone points out, “Chaucer was a ‘translator’ who delightedly engaged with the cultural past and present of the Europe of his day, using them to compose poetry in new ways” and “for his transformations and referential use of poetic narratives […] Boccaccio [was

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⁶ Most of The Monkes Tale was probably written in c.1372-80 (before Chaucer started to write The Canterbury Tales), except four of the stories that are about Chaucer’s contemporaries and were completed after 1386. On the other hand, it is thought that Chaucer started to write The Canterbury Tales most likely around 1387 and continued writing until his death in 1400. He possibly included The Monkes Tale after he wrote those four modern “instances.”

among] the most important.”8 In *The Monkes Tale*, also, Chaucer explicitly drew on Boccaccio’s *De casibus virorum illustrium* (*The Fates of Illustrious Men*), which was cited as ‘subtitle’ in the Tale: “Heere bigynneth the Monkes Tale, de casibus virorum illustrium.”9 On the other hand, for Zenobia’s account he probably consulted to *De claris mulieribus* since *De casibus* does not include Zenobia’s story.

Despite the fact that Chaucer very likely benefited from Boccaccio’s numerous works, he never mentions Boccaccio’s name directly. He seems to attribute these works—at least *De casibus virorum illustrium* and *De claris mulieribus*—to Petrarch rather than Boccaccio.10 This is evident from Chaucer’s mistaken reference to ‘Petrarch’s history of Zenobia’ in *The Monkes Tale*. Here Chaucer advises the reader who wishes to know,

How that she was biseged and y-take,
Lat hym unto my maister Petrark go,
That writ y-nough of this, I undertake.

(IV: 3514-16)

The stories in *The Monkes Tale* are accounts of tragic fate marked by the unpredictable ups and downs of life, or rather by the arbitrary decisions of “Fortune” or, at work in some Biblical characters’ falls, of God. In the stories, people suffer misfortune because they are evil, or proud, or are


9 The surviving manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* were edited soon after Chaucer’s death. The edition used here is *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. from numerous manuscripts by the Rev. Walter W. Skeat, Vol. 4: *The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897). Line numbers of citations from this work henceforward will be indicated in the text.

10 See Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy*, pp. 40, 168.
cheated by their brothers, children, and so on. But also, as in Zenobia’s case, some of them ‘fall’ although they were ‘good’. As we shall see shortly, her fall comes as a result of her rising too high, which poses a challenge in the face of Fortune. In Zenobia’s story, the moment of pathos comes when the beautiful and once powerful queen is exhibited as royal captive in Aurelian’s triumphal procession. Her lavish jewellery, of which we read in both Boccaccio and Chaucer, have been degraded into golden chains indicating her enslavement: “Biforen his triumphe walketh she/With gilte cheynes on hir nekke hanging.” Nevertheless, “Crowned was she” (IV: 3553-55).11

This captivity is the peripeteia, the sudden change, the reversal of fortune from prosperity to ruin in Zenobia’s life. Chaucer does not explicitly accuse Zenobia of pride or evil nature, although he does so in relation to fallen characters in most other accounts. The only thing that may imply that Zenobia deserved this ‘fall’ is that, after her husband’s death, “Agayn hir foos she faught so cruelly” (IV: 3519). Chaucer does not indicate that she had hubris, or that she was presumptuous or dared too much. But it is clear that Zenobia had and did all of the above: as a woman, even from childhood, she rejected acting like a woman and pretended to be a ‘man’ by becoming involved in manly affairs. In brief, she crossed boundaries. Then she became a ruler and a queen. In that capacity, she defeated all her male

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11 Many recent studies of Chaucer’s work, especially on gender, do not involve Zenobia. See, for example, Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales’ (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Anne Laskaya, Chaucer’s Approach to Gender in ‘The Canterbury Tales’ (Cambridge and Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 1995).
opponents and most importantly, she defied the Great Empire of Rome. Perhaps that is why, rather than condemning her in a few words, Chaucer preferred to narrate Zenobia’s story more elaborately—her rise, and her fall through defeat by “This grete Romayn, this Aurelian” (IV: 3551). In fact, with 16 stanzas Zenobia’s tale is longer than any other account in The Monkes Tale. The Monkes Tale consists of 17 “instances” that are narrated in a total of 97 stanzas, of which each contains 8 lines. 7 of these instances are Biblical, while 6 of them are mythological or historical, and 4 are modern and are concerned with Chaucer’s contemporaries. Cenobia (Zenobia) is the only woman among the seventeen. Following the Introduction (1 stanza), the topics and respective length of the 17 “instances” are: Lucifer (1 stanza), Adam (1 stanza), Sampson (10 stanzas), Hercules (6 stanzas), Nabugodonosor (5 stanzas), Balthasar (8 stanzas), Cenobia (16 stanzas), De Petro Rege Ispannie (2 stanzas), De Petro Rege de Cipro (1 stanza), De Barnabo de Lombardia (1 stanza), De Hugelino, Comite de Pize (7 stanzas), Nero (11 stanzas), De Oloferne (3 stanzas), De Rege Antiocho illustri (7 stanzas), De Alexsandro (5 stanzas), De Iulio Cesare (7 stanzas), Cresus (5 stanzas).

The part of the Tale concerning Zenobia runs as follows: the first stanza tells of who “Cenobia, of Palimerie quene” is (IV: 3437). While Boccaccio had written that Zenobia was “rather in the manner of the Persians” (228), Chaucer links her up with Persian royalty, asserting that, “Of kinges blode of Perse is she descended” (IV: 3442). The following two stanzas tell of her “childhede” and youth, and that she escaped from the “office of wommen,
and to wode she wente” (IV: 3446) (“office,” of course, means ‘duty’).

Zenobia’s strength and superiority over men are clearly identified but contrary to comparisons in De claris mulieribus, there is no comparison with specific historical men indicated by name:

She dorste wilde beestes dennes seke,
And rennen in the montaignes al the night,
And slepen under a bush, and she coude eke
Wrestlen by verray force and verray might
With any yong man, were he never so wight;
Ther mighte no-thing in hir armes stonde.

(IV: 3453-58)

The fourth stanza is about her marriage: “But atte laste hir frendes han hir married/To Odenake” (IV: 3461-62). And the fifth and sixth describe her relation with her husband in terms of sexual intercourse; how “wolde she suffre him doon his fantasye” only in order to conceive a child. Though both consider the same subject, Chaucer’s description differs from Boccaccio’s. For example, while Boccaccio perceives this characteristic of Zenobia as being “praiseworthy” and a “moral scruple” that is “rarely found,” Chaucer refrains from moral or other commentary and lets Zenobia speak to her husband directly:

He got na-more of hir, for thus she syde,
‘It was to wyves lecherye and shame
In other cas, if that men with hem playde.’

(IV: 3482-84)

The following seventh stanza indicates that, “Two sones by this Odenake hadde she” (IV: 3485). But in the third line of this stanza “un-to our tale
turne we” (IV: 3447), and in the rest of the stanza Zenobia’s warrior qualities are enumerated. In other words, particularly in comparison to Boccaccio, Chaucer cuts rather short the description of Zenobia’s life as wife and mother and swiftly returns to the description of her warrior-career, which he considers the main concern of “our tale.”

Among the sixteen stanzas, it is only the eighth stanza that portrays her physical person. But only the first four lines are devoted to this theme, while in the latter four Chaucer moves on to the matter of Zenobia’s education:

Hir riche array ne mighte nat be told
As wel in vessel as in her clothing;
She was al clad in perree and in gold,
And eke she lafte nought, for noon hunting,
To have of sondry tongues ful knowing,
Whan that she leyser hadde, and for to entende
To lernen bokes was al hir lyking,
How she in vertu mighte hir lyf dispende.

(IV: 3493-3500)

In the second stanza, we had been told in detail what kind of animals “she wolde kille:” “Leouns, leopardes, and beres al to-rente” (IV: 3450-51). We may surmise that Chaucer engages the specific enumeration of the fierce beasts Zenobia would hunt because this heightens pathos. On the other hand, contrary to Boccaccio, here in IV: 3497, he does not detail Zenobia’s linguistic learning. Rather than naming which languages she had acquired, Chaucer tells us that she had “sondry tonges ful knowing.” This, as we are going to see, stands in direct contrast to Pizan’s account. However, it is noteworthy that Chaucer stresses that, “To lernen bokes was al her lyking.” But we are not told what kind of books she read, only that they were “hir
lyking.” On the other hand, on the basis of the last line of the stanza we can assert that these books were about ethics (books teaching “How she in vertu mighte hir lyf dispende”), which will also prove important in the later chapters of this dissertation, since the crux of the humanist conception of learning was the subject of ethics. Thus, Chaucer makes only brief mention of both her glamorous person and her learning, merged in one stanza, though he does so in impressive terms. He probably considered these parts of the story not relevant to his main theme, which is the ‘fall’ of the Queen.

From the ninth through the twelfth stanzas, Chaucer covers Odenathus’ reign and that of Zenobia’s after her husband’s death. After we are told of “Hir batailes” and that “she conquered” and “faught so cruelly” (IV: 3509, 3512, 3519), especially in the twelfth stanza (IV: 3525-32), we see how she gained absolute power and dominance over her opponents. Chaucer gives the accounts of two Roman Emperors, “Claudius” and “Galien,” and also “Ermyn, [...] Egipcien, Surrien, [and] Arabien” emperors that were defeated by Zenobia, and that they,

\[
\text{Within the feeldes that dorste with hir fighte} \\
\text{Lest that she wolde hem with hir hondes slen,} \\
\text{Or with hir meynnee putten hem to flighte.}
\]

As is seen, Chaucer, unlike Boccaccio, depicts Zenobia as an aggressor. While Boccaccio’s story conveys the idea that her country’s military actions were primarily defensive, here we see that she attacks and usurps power.

From the thirteenth stanza through the end, we are told that, “This mighty quene may no whyl endure” and how “Fortune out of hir regne made
hir falle/To wrecchednesse and to misaventure” (IV: 3538-40). Despite the fact that he has written so extensively about Zenobia’s defeat by Aurelian, Chaucer does not give details as Boccaccio had done. He only writes “shortly for to seye,” that Aurelian “atte last hir hente [.]” While Boccaccio had written that Zenobia was defeated because “she lacked necessary supplies,” Chaucer does not even attempt to explain ‘why’ she was defeated. The difference ought of course be explained in terms of generic difference: Boccaccio is writing historical biography, which in the second half of the fourteenth century had already sufficiently matured to display elaboration of material causes of historical events.\(^\text{12}\) Chaucer’s work is a tragic account of the fall of the great which later would be echoed in Lydgate’s *The Fall of Princes*. Unlike Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, in Chaucer the story concludes with Zenobia’s humiliation in Aurelian’s procession, since this is the important point for the ‘tragedy’ of Zenobia. As in the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer excluded the details of his source which were not relevant to pathos, and played with some other details, explaining them further. He also changed the way the story was told, mainly because this is a narrative poem and not a prose work like Boccaccio’s encyclopaedic third person narrative.

*The Legend of Good Women*, which was written c.1383-86, includes 9 stories about 10 women, namely Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra. The

stories are written with a concentration on their suffering, and they tell of the women’s seduction and abandonment, suicide, rape and torture. Thus, although derived from Ovid and Virgil, Chaucer omits anything in these stories which is not relevant to his purpose. Since the heroines in *The Legend of Good Women* demonstrate faithfulness in love, and they are all presented simply as lovers or wives, Chaucer did not include Zenobia in *The Legend of Good Women*. Rather he considered her story as a tragedy and included her in *The Monkes Tale*.

Thus we find that Chaucer’s revision of Boccaccio rests on the principle of genre.
“Seulette suy et seulette veuil estre”: ‘I am a lone woman, and I want to be a lone woman’, wrote Christine de Pizan in *Le livre de la mutacion de Fortune*, which she composed in 1400-1403. She was one of the outstanding figures of French Literature in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. She wrote many works in French vernacular, in verse and prose, traversing a variety of genres and subject matter. Pizan started writing as a result of the course of events in her life, which events compel one to think that she was left indeed with no choice but to write. However, it is evident from her writing that she was concerned and involved with her work not only in terms of content but also in terms of the physical presentation of her works, since she was one of the first vernacular authors who supervised the copying and illuminating of her own books. The content of her works, besides revealing her involvement with the political and social events of her time, derives directly from her life. *Le livre de la cité des dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*)—which will be discussed in this and the coming chapter—is, moreover, framed autobiographically. It is a first-person narration that situates “Christine,” as Pizan refers to herself in the work, in relation to the most prominent debate concerning women and education in the late Middle Ages. Considering this relation between her life and works,
Pizan (1364-c.1430) was Italian by birth. Her father was Thomas de Pizzano, a physician and astrologer in Bologna. Pizan was born in Venice while her father was one of the counsellors of Venice. In 1368, the family moved to Paris since Thomas de Pizzano accepted the position of physician and astrologer offered in the court of Charles V. Pizan and her two brothers, Paolo and Aghinolfo, spent a comfortable childhood in Paris, mainly because Charles V very much admired and supported their father. In 1380, when she was fifteen years old, Pizan married Étienne de Castel who was a nobleman from Picardy. The marriage was realised at her father’s request but seems swiftly to have turned into a love marriage. Soon after their marriage, Étienne de Castel became secretary and notary to the King. But with the death of Charles V on 16 September 1380, especially financially, hard times began for the family. This was mainly because Charles V’s successor, Charles VI, did not behave as generously toward the family; both Pizan’s father’s and husband’s salary was reduced. Pizan tells of the situation of the family in her *Mutacion de Fortune* (‘Change of Fortune’) and recounts that with the King’s death came “la porte ouverte de ses

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infortunes”: ‘the door to their misfortunes was open’.² In a few years thereafter, Pizan’s father became ill and died at some point between 1385 and 1390. This was followed by her husband’s death in 1389 or 1390 while he was accompanying Charles VI in Beauvais. Thus, at the age of twenty-five, after ten years of marriage, Pizan was widowed with three children—two sons and a daughter—in addition to her mother and a niece who looked to her for support.

Faced with debt and life expenses, there was not much choice for a woman to make a living in the 1390s. The first and probably most immediate option would be remarriage. But Pizan, for some reason we do not know, did not choose to remarry. Another possibility was to enter a convent, but this would not have helped the rest of the family. If her husband had been a tradesman, she could have continued the business herself, but that had not been the case. She also did not think of going back to Italy, which may have provided her and her family with better life conditions. Rather than doing anything else, Pizan applied herself to study. Her first piece of writing appeared in c.1393 and within ten years, she was earning her family’s keep by writing. However, none of the biographies of Christine de Pizan consulted indicate how the family survived in the interim period. But we do know that they were rough times. Although we do not know the exact dates, one of her sons died, her daughter was placed in a

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nunnery and in c.1396, her other son was sent to the British household of
the Earl of Salisbury. In her *Mutacion de Fortune*, Pizan tells how she
gathered nothing but scraps from her father’s treasure. She states that it was
not possible for her to benefit from her father’s wealth since she was a
woman. She could not inherit her father’s possessions, according to her
explanation, because of custom rather than ‘justice’, that is to say, law. She
claims that if ‘justice reigned’, neither daughters nor sons would lose
anything in this respect. Pizan explains that through lack of ‘learning’ (in
the science of law, we must assume), she lost her inheritance, ‘the rich
treasure’ belonging to her father. Allegorically, the ‘treasure’ she tells of
implies the learnedness of her father besides his possessions, both of which
were not available to Pizan since she ‘was born female’. This account by
Pizan of why she lost her inheritance will prove particularly valuable for us
in the chapters on Erasmus and Elyot below, as the two early modern
humanists will base their argument for the need to educate women primarily
on such episodes of misery experienced by widows.

As we have seen in the second chapter above, most women belonging
to the nobility and upper middle classes were taught to read but it is
doubtful whether they in fact learned to write. Thus, despite the fact that
most women in the late fourteenth century were taught only to read, Pizan
had been encouraged by her father to learn both to read and write. Not much
is known about her early years. For example, we do not know anything

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3 *Mutacion de Fortune*, I: 379-408. The material in the rest of the present paragraph
derives from this passage in the *Mutacion*. 
about of what her reading curriculum consisted, but it is clear that Pizan’s instruction entirely depended on her father. We are certain that she knew Italian and French and most probably Latin. Although her father supported her ambition for learning, since her mother did not consider this suitable for a girl, she could not continue and had quit studying before she got married at age fifteen.

After her husband’s death, she took up her studies again. She began by reading the history of the world including the history of Hebrews, Assyrians, Romans, and the French. Besides history, she read in science and poetry.\(^4\) From c.1393 until her death in c.1430, she produced a series of works under the patronage of numerous nobles, including the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. After 1418 she left the court and settled in the Convent of Poissy outside Paris where her daughter was a nun. She no longer needed patronage and her *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* (1429, *The Tale of Joan of Arc*) was produced without such. Initially, starting around 1393, she wrote love poems\(^5\) but she became famous when she entered the debate *La Querelle de la ‘Rose’*.

The *querelle de la ‘Rose’* was about *Le Roman de la rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*) which was begun by Guillaume de Lorris (c.1230)

\(^4\) See *Lavision-Christine and Christine’s Vision*, III: 10.

\(^5\) *Cent Ballades, Virelais and Rondeaux* (1399-1402) include her early lyrical compositions. They are mostly written in the first decade following her husband’s death. The first twenty of *Cent Ballades* explicitly display her grief, whereas the others may be seen as experiments in different lyrical themes and forms.
and completed by Jean de Meung (c.1275-80). As is known, the *Roman de la rose* tells of the dream-vision of Amant (‘lover’). In his dream, Amant enters a beautiful garden where he sees the Rose and falls in love. In the story, in which Amant seeks for help from numerous allegorical figures, the lady is presented as a ‘rose’ in the garden. The debate, which began with a treatise written in favour of the *Roman de la rose* by Jean de Montreuil, is mainly concerned with the treatment of women and misogyny in the *Roman de la rose*. Pizan was the only woman who participated in the debate. She had three allies in her objections to the *Roman*: Jean Gerson, the chancellor of the University of Paris; Guillaume de Tignonville, the provost of Paris, and Marshal Jean le Meingre Boucicaut. Opposing them were Jean de Montreuil, provost of Lille; Gontier Gol, King Charles VI’s first secretary and notary, and his brother Pierre Gol, the canon of Paris and Tournay. Around twenty treatises and letters were circulated among them for about three years, in c.1400-1402.

For Pizan’s opponents, the *Roman de la rose* was a work of the highest literary merit, and a moral text in which the pursuit of sensual love was skillfully satirised and condemned. For those, like Pizan, who criticised the

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Roman for its misogyny, the satire and condemnation of sensual love was tantamount to the satire and condemnation of women. Pizan was particularly against what she found to be misogynistic generalisations made by Jean de Meung and argued that the text presented an un-Christian view of the relations between the sexes. In her Epistre au dieu d’Amours (1399, The Letter to the God of Love), she asserts that rather than concentrating on love and charity, the Roman de la rose is based on how men should trap and catch their sexual prey, which, according to Pizan, degrades women into a position less than human. Pizan elaborately expressed her views related to the querelle in her various works besides the Epistre au dieu d’Amours, such as the Epistre sur ‘Le roman de la rose’ (1401-1403, The Epistle on ‘The Romance of the Rose’) and Dit de la rose (1402, Concerning the Rose). The querelle de la ‘Rose’ ultimately turned out to be the first phase of a broader tradition of literary debate on women, known as the querelle des femmes, which extended into the early modern period. Le livre de la cité des dames (The Book of the City of Ladies) may be seen as Pizan’s final statement on the issues that concerned the debate about the Roman de la Rose.


The *Cité des dames*, which was written in c.1404-1405, is a work in which Pizan locates herself as the main character. The book starts with Christine’s—Pizan calls herself ‘Christine’ throughout the *Cité des dames*—finding Mathéolus’ book while she is working in her study: skimming through the books in her library to find some lyric poetry in order to release her mind from the heavier subjects she has been studying for too long, Christine comes across a book that does not belong to her. She has been in search for lyric poetry because it would neither disturb nor weary her mind. The search for lyric poetry here is overdetermined since we soon shall find that she will come across a book that signifies the diametric opposite of what lyric poetry signifies in the Middle Ages. Lyric poems described the adored ‘lady’ and her intellectual and other accomplishments. They presented women in a pleasant manner which in fact means they were far removed from reflecting the ‘real’ attitude toward women, as ‘Christine’ herself will discover as she rummages through her library. But as if she were meant to encounter a sign, rather than lyric poetry, Christine comes across a misogynist book—the direct opposite of what she had been looking for—that may indeed have been the most disturbing and confusing late medieval culture had produced. It is further significant that the book does not belong to her; it comes to her from the ‘outside’, as it were. She starts reading the book and realises that in it, women are treated in a fashion unacceptable and distressing to her. So 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."

The very book that so disturbed Christine was *The Lamentations (Lamenta)* of Mathéolus, which had been written in the late thirteenth century. Pizan’s selection of Mathéolus’ *Lamentations* was not arbitrary. On the one hand, the book was chosen because of its misogynistic approach to women and marriage. Another reason was that Jean le Fèvre, one of Pizan’s contemporaries, recently had translated the book, in addition to authoring another book entitled, *Livre de Leesce*, between the years 1380 and 1387, as a refutation of Mathéolus’ *Lamentations*. Most probably, both of the books were of current interest and known to Pizan. Mathéolus, in his book written in Latin around 1300, complains about his position as an unhappy husband. He states that when he was young, he fell in love with a widow and married her. But Mathéolus regrets that he did so, since now he is with a wife who is no longer attractive and a constant nuisance bothering him with children and household duties. He stresses that men should avoid falling into the same trap and gives examples of stories and sayings about the failings of women throughout the book. Thus, in the *Cité des dames*, having

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9 *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1998), p. 4. Unless otherwise stated, this translation of the *Cité des dames* will be quoted, and page numbers of citations from this edition will be indicated in the text.


read Mathéolus’ *Lamentations*, Christine is “occupied with these painful thoughts,” when three allegorical ladies, namely Reason, Rectitude and Justice enter and launch a discourse intended to correct the negative sense she has begun to develop about women under the influence of her reading of Mathéolus. They explain who they are, and tell her how she could construct a city with help from them. Throughout the remainder of the *Cité des dames*, Christine builds an allegorical city inhabited by women alone with the help of the three figures of Reason, Rectitude and Justice.

It is surprising that few literary historians have observed that Pizan’s model for the *Cité des dames* was most likely St. Augustine’s *de civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), and those that did, have not attached much importance to the connection.12 Augustine had written *de civitate Dei* in c.413-426 AD, for the vindication of Christianity. Pizan’s project in the *Cité des dames* was identical—the vindication of women’s moral and intellectual worth. In fact, the title of Pizan’s allegorical city, *Cité des dames*, alludes directly to St. Augustine’s *de civitate Dei*. As Sandra L. Hindman points out, Augustine’s *de civitate Dei* was “available at court in a French translation and commentary by Raoul de Presles made for King Charles V.”13 The allusion to the *civitate Dei* is not restricted to the title of Pizan’s work. Besides the similarity of the two titles, the representation of the *Cité des dames* in the illuminations resembles those of the *civitate Dei* in the

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12 I shall be citing in the following pages the references to the parallel between the two works which I have been able to find.

frontispieces of manuscripts which were available to Pizan. Pizan may have been influenced by these frontispieces which display two walled cities, respectively the city of God and Man.

Pizan also follows Augustine in using the city as a symbol of the ideal community. However, she depicts only one city, which is populated by female warriors, good wives, and saintly women, whereas Augustine included two, one being the city of God and the other being the city of Man. Pizan takes the city of God, the heavenly one, as the exemplum which was, in Augustine’s words, “destined to reign with God from all eternity,” and transforms it into a heavenly city of ladies, the Cité des dames. As Rosalind Brown-Grant points out in her editorial Introduction, Pizan directly alludes to the civitate Dei through the words of Lady Justice, just before the Cité des dames concludes, in III.18: “And even though I have not named all the holy ladies who have lived, who are living, and who will live—for I could name only a handful!—they can all be included in this City of Ladies. Of it may be said, ‘Glorisa dicta sunt de te, civitas Dei’ ” (254). ‘Gloriosa dicta

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15 In greatness, Pizan’s City also resembles those of Thebes and Troy. She compares them with the Cité des dames and declares that unlike Thebes and Troy, “this City [...] will never be destroyed, nor will it ever fall, but remain prosperous forever, regardless of all its jealous enemies. Although it will be stormed by numerous assaults, it will never be taken or conquered” (11).


sunt de te, civitas Dei’ means ‘Glorious things are spoken of thee, O City of God’. The expression comes from Psalm 87: 3, in the Old Testament. Referring to “this City of ladies” as the ‘City of God’, Pizan establishes the heavenly city which Augustine had proclaimed to be realised on earth in the form of the Christian Church.18

Pizan’s attempt to assimilate her work to the highest order of discursive sanctity is not limited to her use of de civitate Dei. Around two years before the Cité des dames, in c.1400-1403, in Mutacion de Fortune, Pizan had explicitly meditated on her Christian name’s derivation from the name of Christ.19 There she claimed that her name could be obtained by adding the letters I, N, E to the name of the most perfect of men who ever lived. Hence from her explicit statement we derive her name: Christ-ine. And as already pointed out, since she locates herself as the main character in the Cité des dames, the central interlocutor of the allegorical figures is named “Christine.” In the same latter work, Pizan also includes reference to her “patron saint” St. Christine. The reference is strategically placed (it comes in the middle of Part III, which is concerned with female saints) and the discourse on St. Christine is longer than the speeches on all other saints. “St. Christine, virgin, was from the city of Tyre and the daughter of Urban, master of the knights” (234). She rejected the worship of idols already when she was twelve years old. As soon as her father recognised that “her heart

18 Jody Enders in “The Feminist Mnemonics of Christine de Pizan” [Modern Language Quarterly 55: 3 (September 1994): 231-50] argues that Pizan “employs a technique reminiscent of those of Saint Augustine or Alain of Lille to establish mnemonically that woman was also created in the image of God.” See esp. p. 240.

19 Mutacion de Fortune, 1: 369-78.
was in Jesus Christ,” he tried to convince her to worship idols. After many threats and tortures, seeing that he could not change her mind, Urban threw her into the sea with a stone tied around her neck. Angels came to save her and “Jesus Christ descended in His own person with a large company of angels and baptised her and named her Christine, from His own name, and He crowned her and placed a shining star on her forehead” (236). She was tortured by her father and a number of other “judges” who tried to convert her. After a series of sufferings, she was martyred with two arrows one of which was shot “in her side and the other in her heart” (240).

Pizan’s use of the very name and figure of Christ to establish the sanctity and high genealogy of her work further extends into the domain of iconography. In the *Cité des dames*, Pizan’s description of herself just before the three Ladies enter ought to be taken into consideration in this context. Christine has just read Mathéolus and is overcome by the sense of women’s insignificance:

So occupied with these painful thoughts, my head bowed in shame, my eyes filled with tears, leaning my cheek on my hand, elbow propped on the pommel of my chair’s armrest, I suddenly saw a ray of light fall on my lap, as though it were the sun. I shuddered then, as if wakened from sleep, for I was sitting in a shadow where the sun could not have shone at that hour (6).

Pizan tells of the scene as if she were describing a painting; she is sitting at her desk with downcast eyes, supporting her head with one of her hands. In this passage, Pizan is engaged in *ekphrasis*. In other words, she conveys a description with the intention of bringing her posture—both physically and
mentally—vividly before the mind’s, the reader’s, eye. Jean H. Hagstrum terms this kind of narrative “iconic prose.”

Although it would come more than a century after Pizan, upon reading the description of Christine’s posture of distress as she is sitting at her desk, one cannot help but think of Albrecht Dürer’s *The Man of Sorrows Seated*. The portrayal of Pizan’s posture seems to foreshadow the iconographic type known as *The Man of Sorrows Seated*, which once again directs our attention to the figure of Christ: Hans Leinberger’s *Christ in Distress* is of the same type as Dürer’s *The Man of Sorrows Seated*. Stephen Greenblatt argues that this iconographic type conveys “more powerfully than any other image of the body [...] a mood of utter forsakenness, desolation and helplessness.”

At this point in the opening of the work, Christine also sees “a ray of light fall” on her lap, which is given as extraordinary, even supranatural. The light falling on her lap is clearly not empirically or naturally justifiable since Christine mentions that she “was sitting in a shadow where the sun could not have shone at that hour.” Then she lifts her head to see “where

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this light was coming from,” and she sees “three crowned ladies [Reason, Rectitude, and Justice] standing before me, and the splendor of their bright faces shone on me and throughout the entire room” (6). This surprises Christine since her “doors were shut and they had still entered.” Telling her that they had come to “console” her, Reason explains who they are and advises Christine in the following terms:

Dear daughter, know that God’s providence, which leaves nothing void or empty, has ordained that we, though celestial beings, remain and circulate among the people of the world here below, in order to bring order and maintain in balance those institutions we created according to the will of God in the fulfilment of various offices, that God whose daughters we three all are and from whom we were born (9).

These God-sent ladies, the Virtues, provide for Christine examples of past and present heroines who will form and populate the allegorical city, which is, in fact, the book Pizan was going to write that describes those ladies. Pizan indicates this through the allegorical words of Lady Reason:

Let us go to the Field of Letters. There the City of Ladies will be founded on a flat and fertile plain, where all fruits and freshwater rivers are found and where the earth abounds in all good things. Take the pick of your understanding and dig and clear out a great ditch wherever you see the marks of my ruler, and I will help you carry away the earth on my shoulders (16).

The narration proceeds in dialogue form, in which Christine enters into debate with the allegorical figures and the city is built as Christine not only learns the intellectual history of women but feels also genuinely persuaded that each woman mentioned by the allegorical figures indeed deserves to be
admitted into the City. Christine guards the borders of her City as rigorously as Plato guards his Republic.

The Cité des dames consists of three parts. In Part I, Reason gives her examples of women whom Earl Jeffrey Richards has grouped into three, as “ladies of political and military accomplishment,” “ladies of learning and skill,” and “ladies of prudence.” If we agree with Richards’ division, we must also concede that Pizan clearly follows the tripartite division of knowledge scholastic philosophy had assimilated from Aristotle. Pizan seems to pursue in her description the hierarchy of types of knowledge from the lowest (Richards’ “political and military accomplishment”) to the highest (Richards’ “prudence”). In fact, the pursuit of the hierarchy is observable not only in Part I, as Richard notes, but throughout the Cité des dames, as Pizan escalates the enumeration of women of renown from Pagan culture, to a mixture of Pagan and Christian culture, ultimately to Christian culture purely. This, we shall see, goes against the tendency of Pizan’s main source or sub-text, Boccaccio’s De claris mulieribus, and indicates her revisionary position in relation to Boccaccio. The women Reason enumerates in Part I, like Isis and Arachne, mostly come from pre-Christian history. In Part II, Rectitude continues to provide examples of filial piety, chastity, devotedness to marital love, and faithfulness in love in women,

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23 See Richards’ Introduction to his translation, The Book of the City of Ladies, pp. xlii-xliv, where he groups the stories and their heroines according to, respectively, subject matter and accomplishment.

24 In Aristotle, from lowest to highest: phronēsis (judgment of or reasoning about the right action to take); technē (skill and art); sophia (wisdom): Deniz Şengel, Istanbul Bilgi University, Department of Comparative Literature Course, “Painting and Poetry I” Lecture Notes, Fall 1999.
including Drypetina, Arthemisia, Dido, Xanthippe (Socrates’ wife) and Pompeia Paulina (Seneca’s wife). Rectitude’s examples consist of Hebrew and Christian as well as Pagan women, and further range from Mariamme and Clotilda to Hypsipyle and Argia. Arguments in favour of educating women are also made in Part II. Part III, on the other hand, is devoted to female saints exclusively; its main interlocutor is Justice.

The actual stories of the women in the *Cité des dames* too, primarily derived from Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* (c.1361-1375), which was available to Pizan both in Latin and French. The French translation of Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, *De cleres et nobles femmes*, was completed around 1401 by Laurent de Premierfait. Philip August Becker argues that the relation of the *Cité des dames* to Boccaccio’s work is “something between a translation and free invention.” However, Pizan may have used *De claris mulieribus* only for the first two parts of the *Cité des dames*, since Boccaccio does not include Christian women in *De claris mulieribus*. Moreover, in his conclusion Boccaccio indicates the reason for not including women of the Christian era, to whom he refers in the following passage as “the women of our time” and “the women of today”: “I have reached the women of our time, in which the number of illustrious

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25 For *De claris mulieribus*’ being the major source for the *Cité des dames*, see Patricia A. Phillippy, “Establishing Authority: Boccaccio’s *De Claris Mulieribus* and Christine de Pizan’s *Le livre de la cité des dames,*” *The Romanic Review* 77:3 (July 1986): 129-62; Brown-Grant’s Introduction to her edition of *City of Ladies*, p. xviii; Sarah Lawson’s Introduction to *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or The Book of the Three Virtues* (London and New York: Penguin, 1985), p. 21; Richards’ Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, pp. xxxviii-xlil.

26 Cited in Richards’ Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p. xxxviii.
ones is so small that I think it more suitable to come to an end here rather than proceed farther with the women of today.  

Pizan may have used Vincent de Beauvais’ *Miroir historial* for the last part of *Cité des dames*, as well as Jean le Fèvre’s *Livre de Leesce*. Beauvais, of course, takes up male and female saints together and there is no distinguishing emphasis on female saints. It may be assumed that Pizan used Beauvais in order to set up the historical framework. On the other hand, Jean le Fèvre tells of female saints in about eighty-five lines in his 4000-line text, which may be regarded as a kind of summary. Despite the fact that she seems to have consulted both, Pizan does not mention Jean le Fèvre’s name in the text whereas she mentions Beauvais only once: “If you want more examples [of female saints], you need only look at the *Speculum historiale* of Vincent de Beauvais, and there you will find a great many” (234). We shall see that Pizan’s attitude toward Beauvais differs from the one toward Boccaccio.

Even though Pizan used contemporary sources other than Boccaccio in the *Cité des dames*, it seems that she wanted to expose, for the most part, his name and thus his authority in her work. It is apparent from her own inclusion of both Boccaccio’s name and his *Decameron* that Pizan not only benefited from *De claris mulieribus* but also consulted Boccaccio’s

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28 Vincent of Beauvais’ Latin text, *Speculum historiale*, was finished around 1258. For the French translation, see *Miroir historial*, trans. Jean de Vignay (Paris: Verard, 1495-1496). To my knowledge, there is no English translation of this work.
Throughout the *Cité des dames*, Pizan uses Boccaccio as a source as well as invoking him by name as a witness in support of her claims. She in a way *leans* on Boccaccio, his literary credibility and fame as well as his work, and thus establishes her own work on well-built contemporary ground that provides reliability and respect. Her project—of defending not only historical women but also, in Boccaccio’s phrase, “the women of our time”—was so novel that she needed the credibility which Boccaccio’s name and work would lend her. Writing in an intellectual environment and against a heritage essentially hostile to her project, Pizan needed this reliance as a rhetorical gesture. Timothy J. Reiss succinctly describes the nature of the heritage and the intellectual environment against which Pizan was writing:

> The treatment of women’s status by the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition is largely familiar: woman was responsible for the Fall, she was lubricious, in thrall to sexual passion, instinct, animality, and so on. Her virtues were the corresponding ones of passivity, modesty, chastity patience, silence, temperance, and obedience: virtues for which women had not infrequently been idealized in some quarters [...].

Although, as we saw, Becker argues that the *Cité des dames* is “something between a translation and free invention,” what Pizan achieves

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29 Pizan directly refers to the *Decameron* as well as Boccaccio in the *Cité des dames* in I.28, I.29, I.30, I.39, I.41, II.2, II.14, II.15, II.16, II.17, II.19, II.43, II.52, II.59, II.60, II.63.

is beyond a re-vision; it is a new vision. And it is a correction of
Boccaccio’s views on women and their capabilities. As she leans on the
older and established author with her specific references to Boccaccio which
we have listed above in n29, nevertheless these citations are for the most
part ironic and betray Pizan’s double stance toward the more ancient writer.
Pizan includes women whom Boccaccio does not even consider as
“praiseworthy” under any circumstance. She, for example, tells of one of
her contemporaries in I.41, a woman named Anastasia, who does
illuminations for her books:

Regarding what you say about women expert in the art of painting, I
know a woman today, named Anastasia, who is so learned and skilled
in painting manuscript borders and miniature backgrounds that one
cannot find an artisan in all the city of Paris—where the best in the
world are found—who can surpass her, nor who can paint flowers and
details as delicately as she does, nor whose work is more highly
esteemed, no matter how rich or precious the book is. People cannot
stop talking about her. And I know this from experience, for she has
executed several things for me which stand out among the ornamental
borders of the great masters (85).

Pizan includes contemporary women, mainly because her intention is
not to write about “famous” women like Boccaccio. In I.37, while Reason
had been telling of “the great good accrued to the world” through the
women she has been enumerating, she had stated: “And let no one say that I
am telling you these things just to be pleasant: they are Boccaccio’s own

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31 See Reiss, The Meaning of Literature, p. 100; Susan Schibanoff, “Taking the Gold
out of Egypt: The Art of Reading as a Woman,” in Gender and Reading: Essays on
Readers, Texts and Contexts, ed. Elisabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart
“Jacques Legrand, Christine de Pizan, et la question de la ‘nouvelette’,” Medium Aevum 63:
1 (Spring 1994): 75-83 for the argument that what Pizan was doing in her work was novel.
words, and his credibility is well-known and evident” (78). This may be one of the extreme examples in the *Cité des dames* where Boccaccio is mentioned by name but the passage attributed to him reflects Pizan’s view. Such citations indicate *her* attitude even when she claims that what she writes is “according to Boccaccio” or that “Boccaccio tells this story.” As mentioned, Pizan indicates Beauvais’ name only once. She mentions Boccaccio’s name more than twenty times and at very strategic points. Thus leaning on the more important Boccaccio, she creates a significant genealogy for her own work.32

Besides including Christian women in the *Cité des dames*, Pizan also re-considers Boccaccio’s thoughts and thus comes to differ from Boccaccio in terms of the approach to women, as we will see later in the next chapter, while analysing Pizan’s version of the Zenobia story. Another way in which the *Cité des dames* significantly differs from *De claris mulieribus* is that the former is constituted as a dream allegory while the latter is presented as non-fictional historiography. Pizan arranges the biographies as a part of the dream vision in which the allegorical female figures Reason, Rectitude and Justice describe for Christine the lives of exemplary women. Thus Pizan organises the biographies thematically whereas Boccaccio’s were chronological.

It may also be argued that Pizan follows a different kind of chronology, or rather, that she follows a moral hierarchy rather than a chronology. What

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32 For a study of the importance of genealogy in France in the Middle Ages, see R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies. A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983; 1986).
we have referred to as “moral hierarchy,” Richards terms “thematic systemization.” Richards also points out that this systemisation “presupposes an extraordinary effort on Christine’s part to digest and recast Boccaccio’s work” and “is an implicit refutation of her major source.”33 In Part I, she takes up Pagan women, continues with women both from Pagan and Christian culture in Part II, and devotes the whole of the Part III to Christian women, specifically to female saints. The question that should be asked is why Pizan devoted a whole part to female saints. It ought also be mentioned that Pizan does not include contemporary saints, although she gives particular examples of contemporary women in Part II, such as French noble ladies. The female saints comprising Part III are from early Christian history, mostly the ones who have suffered and were martyred. Maureen Quilligan argues that Pizan, “incorporates and re-writes” Boccaccio’s violence against the female body in *De claris mulieribus* “by authorising it as hagiography.”34 And Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski claims that, “Pizan chose the powerful discourse of hagiography for the culmination of the *Cité des dames* whose goal is to convert those who maintain that women are inferior to men in every respect.”35 Thus, including the examples of female saints Pizan carries her argument one step further and places that argument in a sacred context.

33 Richards’ Introduction to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p. xlii.


This may only be one aspect of Pizan’s inclusion of female saints, however. Pizan not only includes saints because Christian women ought to be superior to Pagan women, by virtue of their faith. All of the stories of the female saints link at the same point: the saints are either learned or have rhetorical skill; they are beautiful and fortitudinous. In Part III, Pizan represents even the most ‘virtuous’ women primarily in terms of—not their moral virtue, but in terms of intellect and physical strength.

It is against this background that we shall now look at Pizan’s treatment of Zenobia in the *Cité des dames*. 
5. Zenobia the Intellectual: Christine de Pizan

Scholars who have worked on Pizan point at the need for a “close, case-by-case examination of the modifications Christine introduced” to Boccaccio’s text.¹ This chapter takes up the “case” of Zenobia in Pizan, and draws up the variations and revisions she made in Boccaccio’s version of the story.

Like many of the other accounts in Part I of Le livre da la cité des dames, such as those of Nicaula, Semiramis, Artemisia, Circe and Arachne, Zenobia’s story derives from Boccaccio’s De claris mulieribus. Lady Reason launches Zenobia’s story by indicating that she was “queen of the Palmyrenes [and] a lady of noble blood and offspring of the Ptolemies, kings of Egypt” (52). While Boccaccio had written that Zenobia was “rather in the manner of the Persians,”² Chaucer had directly linked her up with Persian royalty. Even from the very beginning Pizan deviates from her source. Throughout Zenobia’s biography she takes up Boccaccio’s account but modifies and reorganises the story according to her purpose.

Following Boccaccio, Pizan states that, “the great courage of this lady and the chivalrous inclination she possessed were obvious throughout her


childhood” (52). We are told that she went “to live in the woods and forests, where, armed with sword and spear, she eagerly hunted” and fought “with lions and bears and all other beasts” (52). But even though Pizan clearly declares Zenobia’s physical strength, she never mentions that Zenobia rejected womanly behaviour and pretended to be a ‘man’ by becoming involved in manly affairs. Whereas Boccaccio had asserted that from childhood, Zenobia “scorned all womanly exercises” and Chaucer had mentioned that she escaped from the “office of wommen,” Pizan finds it sufficient to say that Zenobia, “as soon as she was strong, no one could keep her from leaving the residence of walled cities, palaces and royal chambers in order to live in the woods and forests” (52). She does not distinguish among actions or behaviour as being ‘manly’ or ‘womanly’.

One specific example Pizan provides in order to proclaim Zenobia’s bravery and “chivalric” accomplishments is particularly significant: the defeat of Sapor, the king of the Persians. Sapor’s defeat by the Palmyrenes had been included in both Boccaccio and Chaucer, but had been done so very briefly. In Pizan we are told that Zenobia was leading a part of the army in the attack against Sapor. The other two parts of the army were led by Odenatus himself and his son Herod. In Pizan it is Zenobia’s army that defeats and captures Sapor, and not her husband’s or her stepson’s. While Boccaccio had argued that “it was believed that” Mesopotamia had been captured by her deeds, Pizan’s Lady Reason, while telling what happened at

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3 Concerning Famous Women, 226.
the end of the attack against Sapor, clearly underlines that it was “she” who “placed Mesopotamia under her husband’s rule”:

The end of this affair, just as you can read in history books, was as follows: this lady Zenobia conducted herself so bravely and courageously and with such boldness and strength that she won several battles against this Persian king, and so decisively, thanks to her prowess, that she placed Mesopotamia under her husband’s rule. In the end she lay siege to Sapor in his city and captured him with his concubines and great treasure (53).

Although we see Zenobia fighting and winning battles here, it is asserted that Odenatus himself “desired to conquer by force all the Orient and nearby empires” (52). Thus, as had done Boccaccio, Pizan attributes aggressive military policy to Odenatus rather than to Zenobia, and implies that her military actions were defensive, except when she fought on behalf of her husband.

In the sphere of private life, while both Boccaccio and Chaucer had pointed out that Zenobia decided to marry on the advice of her friends, Pizan elaborates on the topic, indicating that, “under pressure from her parents, she took as husband the king of Palmyrenes” (52). Pizan’s revision here seems to be of an autobiographical nature. As we had indicated in the context of her biography, Pizan herself was married at her father’s—and probably also her mother’s—‘request’. But like her historico-fictional heroine Zenobia, Pizan too, had a happy marriage until her husband’s death. We will see later in this chapter that there are other examples of revisionary

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instances in Zenobia’s story which correspond to Pizan’s personal life. While telling of Zenobia’s marriage, like Boccaccio, Pizan takes up Zenobia’s sexual restraint except to have children, as her ‘chastity’. But in telling of Zenobia’s virtue in chastity, Pizan omits Boccaccio’s argument that “women having similar moral scruples are rarely found”⁵ and further clarifies the nature of the queen’s restraint: “This woman was supremely chaste. Not only did she avoid other men, but she also slept with her husband only to have children and demonstrated this clearly by not sleeping with her husband when she was pregnant” (54). Thus we see Pizan omitting Boccaccio’s misogynistic explanations and revising this part of the story along lines similar to her own life. Below, we are going to note further instances in which Pizan’s revisions of Boccaccio draw on autobiographical experience.

Despite her revisions, Pizan follows closely De claris mulieribus’ version of Zenobia’s life since she also includes Boccaccio’s account of Zenobia’s childhood.⁶ Nevertheless throughout the story, like Chaucer, she omits some passages of De claris mulieribus. Boccaccio had considered Zenobia different from other women, as an exception, but he had praised Zenobia by undermining other women. Pizan entirely removes the parts where Boccaccio dispraises other women, as well as the passages where he compares Zenobia with men, underlining that she had ‘masculine character’ and was involved in manly affairs. Pizan also does not include

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⁵ Concerning Famous Women, p. 228.
⁶ Concerning Famous Women, p. 226.
Boccaccesque phrases like “having [...] overcome feminine softness” or “how praiseworthy was this decision in a woman.” She ‘naturalises’ and ‘normalises’ Zenobia as a female figure.

What sets Pizan’s treatment radically apart, however, from Boccaccio’s and Chaucer’s treatments is that in the Cité des dames, the topic of Zenobia’s education finds greater elaboration. The story of Zenobia is concluded by the description of her remarkable learning. In other words, in Pizan, the topic of learning becomes the crowning, conclusive theme. Pizan entirely sets aside Aurelian’s siege of Palmyra and thus his defeat of Zenobia and the subsequent triumphal procession displaying Zenobia enslaved. She does not even mention Aurelian’s name in the Cité des dames although she refers to other, previous, Roman Emperors, namely Gallienus and Claudius, in the context of pointing out that, “they never dared to undertake anything against” Zenobia (53). The concluding segment of Zenobia’s story in Pizan is as follows:

With all this having been said, the high point of her virtues which I have to tell you was, in summary, her profound learnedness in letters, both in those of the Egyptians and in those of her own language. When she rested, she diligently applied herself to study and wished to be instructed by Longinus the philosopher, who was her master and introduced her to philosophy. She knew Latin as well as Greek, through the aid of which she organised and arranged all historical works in concise and very careful form. Similarly, she desired that her children, whom she raised with strict discipline, be introduced to learning. Therefore, my dear friend, note and recall if you have ever seen or read of any prince or knight more complete in every virtue (54-55).

It is noteworthy that Pizan refers to Zenobia’s “learnedness in letters” as “the high point of her virtues.” Moreover, the “learnedness” is given as
“profound.” She follows Boccaccio in terms of enumerating the foreign languages she learned (her native Egyptian, and Latin and Greek) although she omits Syrian which had been in Boccaccio’s list. Pizan also—as Boccaccio did—indicates her learning in historiography: “she organised and arranged all historical works,” which she read apparently in the original. But she departs significantly from Boccaccio when she mentions that Zenobia learned philosophy from Longinus: Longinus “was her master and introduced her to philosophy,” and it was Zenobia herself who picked him as her mentor since we are told that she “wished to be instructed by Longinus the philosopher.” Boccaccio had explained Zenobia’s involvement with the Greek philosopher simply in terms of language study: she “learned Greek under the philosopher Longinus.”7 Where Boccaccio had identified the linguistic work, Pizan identifies the study of the highest ars, philosophy. However, Pizan does not specify the particular area of philosophy Zenobia studied. That identification, as we shall see in the seventh chapter below, remained for Elyot to undertake around 135 years after Pizan. As had done Boccaccio, Pizan mentions that “she raised [her children] with strict discipline,” but she does not refer to them as ‘sons’ in her story, to which we are going to return below. On the other hand, concerning the education of Zenobia’s children Boccaccio states they “were ordered to speak Latin,”8 whereas Pizan only indicates that they were “introduced to learning,” broadening the spectrum of the children’s studies.

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7 Concerning Famous Women, p. 228.
8 Concerning Famous Women, p. 228.
Pizan does not specifically name the language Zenobia’s children learned as “Latin,” most probably because of her own intention and practice in writing in the French vernacular. Similar to Dante, who preferred to write in Italian but at the same time put to use all his achievement and learnedness in Latin, Pizan wrote in French but she flaunted her learning: she preferred archaic French words; spelled words according to their Latin etymologies; wrote with a complicated syntax in imitation of Latin.\(^9\) Christine’s vocabulary is indeed extraordinarily learned. As Lucy M. Gay pointed out in her article of 1908, “She is credited using for the first time a large number of words.”\(^10\) However, not all of the words Gay has identified were used firstly by Pizan. According to Richards’ (for us) more contemporary investigation, “the first attributions for *circonspect, compact, invective, investigation,* and *palpable*” are found in Pizan’s works.\(^11\) Hence, Pizan’s preference for not naming the language Zenobia’s children learned as Latin opens up many doors to her personal and intentional use of language in her own work.

Thus, we may once again surmise that Pizan’s refraining from mentioning the “Latin” language was autobiographical, like her revision of the reason for Zenobia’s marriage, which, as we have already seen, was in accordance with the circumstances of Pizan’s life. There are other examples


\(^11\) *The Book of the City of Ladies,* p. liv.
in Zenobia’s story which correspond to Pizan’s personal life. Zenobia, like
Pizan, was widowed with children. It may be argued, of course, that most of
the women are widowed in the *Cité des dames*, as widowhood was
practically prerequisite to availability for public achievement. But not so
many of them had children, in addition to being faced with the responsibility
of government. Besides, despite the fact that Pizan’s source Boccaccio says
that Zenobia had “sons,” Pizan suppresses this fact and refers to her
offspring simply as Zenobia’s “children.” This omission may be attributed
to Pizan’s having a daughter besides her two sons.

Pizan’s depiction of Zenobia’s organising and arranging “all historical
works in concise and very careful form” very much resembles the pictorial
representations of Christine’s well-ordered environment in which learning is
systematically classified. This descriptive phrasing is certainly a free
invention and indicates for us that Pizan identified with Zenobia to the point
of imagining the ancient queen in late medieval environment. Zenobia’s
studying history may also allude to Pizan’s study of the same after her
husband’s death.\(^{12}\) There is a specific scene in one of Pizan’s manuscripts,
which depicts Christine studying, specifically, history. In this illumination,
Christine, in the hall of Fortune’s castle, contemplates scenes from ancient

\(^{12}\) In Rosalind Brown-Grant’s translation of *Cité des dames* [(London: Penguin,
1999), p. 49], the very sentence about Zenobia’s history knowledge appears as, “She knew
Latin and Greek and wrote a very elegant abridged history of contemporary events in each
of these languages,” whereas in Richards’ it is as follows: “She knew Latin as well as
Greek, through the aid of which she organised and arranged all historical works in concise
and very careful form.”
The ‘scenes from ancient history’ are classified and ordered like books on shelves in a library.

The *Cité des dames* became popular among Pizan’s contemporaries but commanded substantial readership in the sixteenth century as well. It was translated into Flemish in 1475, after around seventy years it was completed by Pizan. The translation into English came in 1521, after more than a hundred years and within Thomas Elyot’s lifetime. A brief overview of Pizan’s relationship with Britain at this point will indicate that it is not at all surprising that Elyot would take up Pizan’s work and respond to her version of Zenobia. Before Elyot, the landmark author concerned with the ‘Zenobia’ type is Erasmus, though the great humanist did not call any of the public widows about whom he wrote by the name of ‘Zenobia’. Erasmus could, of course, read numerous languages and he did not require the availability of any specific translation. But the fact that Zenobia and Pizan become explicitly thematised in Elyot’s England deserves attention.

The history of Pizan’s personal relations in England were complex enough to continue to play a role in the translation of her work around ninety years after her death. Pizan’s life had been certainly affected in

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13 The illumination is found in the *Mutacion de fortune*, Munich, Staatsbibliothek, gall. II, folio 53.


16 Though at least one Dutch edition of *Le Livre des trois vertus* was available (ms 131, 26 in the Royal Library in The Hague): McLeod, ed., *The Reception of Christine de Pizan*, p. 141.
various ways by the hostile relations between France and England in her lifetime and the Hundred Years’ War that spanned the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. France had made a treaty with England in 1396 when the English King Richard II married Princess Isabella of France. Since Pizan was present in the French court at the time, she had the opportunity to meet the Earl of Salisbury who visited France in connection with arrangements for this marriage. There is no explanatory information about the dimension of the relationship between Pizan and the Earl. However, we do know that when he was returning to England, the Earl took Pizan’s son Jean de Castel with him. In A vision-Christine dated to 1405, Pizan writes that the Earl, after seeing and admiring some of her poems, wanted to take her elder son into his household in order that he might become companion to one of his sons who was the same age. The neutrality of tone in the declaration that her son accompanied Salisbury to England, does not convey the sense that Pizan sent her son unwillingly. However, the story at times makes one think that Jean de Castel was taken hostage, as it were, to lure Pizan herself to the Salisbury court. After his departure for England with her son, the relationship between Pizan and the Earl continued as Pizan wrote him letters and sent him some of her work in the late 1390s. But the peace between France and England did not last long. In 1400 Bullingbrook


dethroned Richard II and became King Henry IV of England. Henry IV destroyed the peace between France and England by attacking France, and his supporters killed the Earl of Salisbury as he had been siding with Richard II, or as Shakespeare puts it, with the soon to be “vn-King’d Richard.”

Thus Henry IV held custody of Pizan’s son after Salisbury’s death.

Henry IV admired Pizan’s work and offered her the invitation to join his court. (Pizan states in her *Avision* that Henry IV saw the books and poems she had sent to the Earl of Salisbury.) Although her son had been virtually taken hostage, Pizan rejected the offer. She explains the reason for her rejection as not believing that someone so disloyal could come to a good end. Eventually, Pizan managed to take her son back but in order to overcome this “trouble,” as she puts it, she had to send to the King copies of her works. As Glenda K. McLeod states, “the return cost her several manuscripts.” Pizan’s relation to the Earl of Salisbury and Henry IV is sufficient to explain how her manuscripts entered British collections.

Among these manuscripts, Harley 4431, which is today found in the British Library, is very important. This manuscript, which dates to 1410-1415 and includes the *Cité des dames*, is the last manuscript of the work copied

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20 We know that the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, also invited Pizan to his court. See McLeod’s Introduction to her edited book, *The Reception of Christine de Pizan From the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Centuries: Visitors to the City* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991; 1992), pp. iv, x.

21 See *Lavision-Christine* and *Christine’s Vision*, III: 11.

22 McLeod’s Introduction, *The Reception of Christine de Pizan*, p. xi.
during Pizan’s lifetime and under her supervision. Most probably, it provides the final version of the work as intended by Pizan.\textsuperscript{23}

Not only the \textit{Cité des dames} but Pizan’s other works too, were translated into English and were well-known in England. Pizan’s \textit{Livre des fais d’armes at de chevalerie}, for example, which was written in c.1410 to advise the French Dauphin on matters of war with the English, became more popular in England than in France.\textsuperscript{24} But Pizan’s name was not mentioned in the initial English translations. William Caxton, the founder of the printing press in England in 1476, re-translated and published the work as \textit{The Boke of the fayt of armes and of chyualrye} in 1489, around eighty years after Pizan had first composed it and around sixty years following her death. Unlike previous translators, Caxton included Pizan’s name in the publication. He probably knew of Pizan’s other works from the time when he had been governor of the “English nation” in Bruges in 1464. Caxton did not have the chance to meet Pizan, since she died about ten years before he came to France, in c.1430. But since Bruges was a Burgundian city, he would have had relations with the household of the Duke of Burgundy who was the patron of numerous works by Pizan including \textit{Le livre des fais d’armes at de chevalerie}.

\textit{Le Livre de la cité des dames} was translated into English by Brian Anslay under the title of \textit{The boke of the cyte of ladyes} and printed by Henry

\textsuperscript{23} On the Harley 4432 manuscript, see Charity Canon Willard, “An Autograph Manuscript of Christine de Pizan?” \textit{Studi francesi} 9 (1965): 452-57.

\textsuperscript{24} On the popularity of \textit{Le livre des fais d’armes at de chevalerie} in England, see Frances Teague, “Christine de Pizan’s Book of War,” in \textit{The Reception of Christine de Pizan}, pp. 25-42.
Pepwell in 1521, more than a hundred years after Pizan wrote the book.\textsuperscript{25}

We know that Pepwell was uncertain whether the \textit{Boke} would sell or not. He approached the Earl of Kent, with the result that the book was published under the Earl’s patronage. One of the possible reasons for the Earl’s patronage is that his uncle, Anthony Woodville, had translated Pizan’s \textit{Proverbs Moraux (The morale prouerbes of Cristyne de Pise)} which had been printed as early as 1478 by Caxton. It is likely that Pepwell consulted the Earl of Kent because of his family’s previous connection with Pizan’s works.\textsuperscript{26}

By the 1530s, five of Pizan’s works, including the \textit{Cité des dames}, had been translated into and printed in English.\textsuperscript{27} Maureen C. Curnow asserts that the main proof of Pizan’s influence in England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are the seventeen manuscripts of her works, besides those of her printed English translations, which are currently in British collections.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{26} For information about the English translation of \textit{Cité des dames} and under which circumstances it was published, see Maureen C. Curnow, “The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes, an English Translation of Christine de Pisan’s \textit{Le Livre de la Cité des dames},” \textit{Bonnes Feuilles} 3 (1974): 115-37.


\textsuperscript{28} Curnow, “The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes,” p. 129.
6. “Monks hate books and women love them”:
The Widow in Desiderius Erasmus

In the *Vidua Christiana* (*The Christian Widow*) of 1526 or 1529, Erasmus divides women into three categories: virgins, married women, and widows. He states that, “these three ways of life do not differ in dignity but rather are three separate stages” of life. Thus Erasmus is careful to establish from the start that the analysis of the three walks of female life is not to involve moral judgment; each holds its own intrinsic human worth. Although he argues that “each of the three states has some special characteristics in which it excels the others” (189), throughout the treatise, among the three, he assigns more importance and the most influential position to the widow rather than to the virgin or the married woman. Erasmus argues that widows have influence on other women as they command a fundamentally different position in society than married women and virgins. In comparison to the other two types, the widow’s life experience is wider and includes the respective experiences of the other two

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1 In *The Colloquies of Erasmus* [ed. and trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 86] the date of *Vidua Christiana* is given as 1526. Erica Rummel [*Erasmus on Women* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 187] gives the date as 1529. I agree with Rummel, since Erasmus dedicated this work on widowhood to Mary, Queen of Hungary, whose husband Louis had died in 1526 at Mohacz. Besides the fact that Mary invited Erasmus to her court in 1528, since her husband died in 1526, a work on widowhood could not have been dedicated to Mary before 1527.

since she has known virginity as well as marriage. Becoming a widow, she is ‘virgin’ once again. Besides her wider experience, a widow’s position in society also differs in terms of her access to the public sphere. Virgins, in the sense that they are cloistered women, were, of course, far removed from public involvement. Married women, on the other hand, were directed toward the domestic sphere. But, lacking the husband, the male counterpart that represented in the public sphere what the married woman represented in the private, the widow had necessarily to be in contact with the public in order to govern her household. Thus Erasmus assigns importance to the widow considering her public involvement. His tripartite classification of women is thus based on a gradation by public involvement ranging from isolatedness to direct access to and open circulation in the public sphere. Erasmus also praises more the widow who does not choose remarrying, which, he finds, renders her bounded to Christ at least as much as the virgin is. In these respects, Erasmus’ description of the widow’s life as the ideal life for a woman runs directly parallel to Pizan’s life as she lived and explained it, and her insistence on remaining a widow. It is as if Erasmus were commenting on Pizan’s life, with substantial reminders of that of Pizan’s Zenobia.

Erasmus argues that the cloistered existence of “perpetual virginity is not demanded of anyone, since it is a rare gift” and it is “revered when it is spontaneous” (188). In other words, he assigns the exceptional status to the nun and predominantly concentrates on the other two. “In married women, according to the Apostle, lies the honour of bearing children and taking care
of their religious education, in reward for which [...] he promised external salvation” (189). Erasmus asserts that along these lines virginity naturally gives way to marriage. “Widowhood, too, has characteristics that make it in some respects preferable to either of the other two conditions,” Erasmus proclaims, “for it has continence in common with virgins but also the generation and upbringing of children (provided that one has borne them) in common with married women” (190). He continues by stating that, “it is a greater virtue to abstain from pleasures of which one has already tasted than to reject something of which one has no experience” (190). In this regard, for Erasmus, widows, provided that they do not choose to remarry, are more virtuous than virgins because their abstinence is deliberate. Besides possession of this state of virtue, widows are also mothers. Since raising and educating children “is a natural and necessary act of piety,” by bringing up orphans in the absence of their fathers, widows would realise “an act of compassion more pleasing to God than any sacrifice” (190). The status of the widow as mother, combined with the state of ‘virginity’, becomes the basis for allowing her to guide virgins and married women, raise the children, and run the household. On the basis of this public role a widow assumes, and upon the possibility that all women may become widows, Erasmus will found his justification for the education of women.

Widows are thus the exemplum, the “in between” behavioural model, for both virgins and married women; the latter two are aided by the “advice and authority” of widows (290). In the absence of the freedom explicitly to argue forth the need for educating women, and their human right to education, Erasmus frames this call as a pragmatic necessity in case a woman becomes widowed. Erasmus’ strategy is superb: he locates the need for education only in the widow but he has already assimilated both the virgin and the married woman into the widow. The “widow” here has become an exemplary figure, even a rhetorical figure, for what cannot otherwise be said. The “function of [the] example,” writes Alexander Gelley, “is precisely to [...] disclose an in between, an opening for picturing, for illustrative realization” of what cannot be truly thematised. One other way in which Gelley describes this phenomenon is by using the rhetorical figure of the synecdoche (part for whole): thus Erasmus’ widow stands for all women. But just as Pizan had ‘leaned on’ Augustine, Boccaccio, and the iconography of Christ, Erasmus frames his defence of women’s education with respect to the Bible. In relation to running the household, Erasmus cites St. Paul’s words to Timothy: “He wrote to his beloved to Timothy: ‘If any widow has children or grandchildren, let her learn first to govern her own household, and to render the aid that is owing to parents. For this is pleasing in the sight of God’ ” (220). Of course, these responsibilities of widowhood

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5 1 Timothy 5: 4 reads as follows: “But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to show piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God.” See the “New Testament,” *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments. King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1998), p. 214.
have social implications. Widowhood enables—or, compels—women to join the public sphere.

As we have seen in the second chapter above, women were directed toward the domestic sphere rather than the public and thus were ‘educated’ accordingly. But, given the fact that women became widowed and—preferably, rather than remarrying—chose to support their families and raise their children on their own, they should be educated bearing in mind this probable later phase of life. Thus, the necessity of the education of women according to Erasmus, is based on a practical reason that is the maintenance of life in the period of widowhood.

Although Erasmus’ defence of the education of women was not intended to be identical to that of men’s (since women’s required more specific rationalisation), in his Encomium matrimoni (1518, In Praise of Marriage), he states that children, “whatever the condition of their birth, [...] turn out very much as one shapes them by education” (72). This is one of those numerous instances in Erasmus’ works where the humanist disregards sex distinction and approaches the topic of the education of the human. As J. Kelley Sowards also mentions, “he clearly made no distinction between the intellectual capacities of girls and boys and extended to all children his concern for their welfare and good upbringing.”6 Nevertheless, at that point in history, the very idea of a woman’s education still necessitated defence and ‘apology’.

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In the *Institutio Christiani matrimonii* (*The Institution of [Christian] Marriage*) dated to 1526, divorce and other issues relevant to marriage are discussed.\(^7\) Erasmus dedicated this work to Catherine of Aragon, the Queen of England, first wife of Henry VIII. In his letter of dedication, Erasmus praises the learning of Queen Catherine. He also states his expectation that the work will be profitable in terms of her daughter Mary’s education.\(^8\) A passage from this work we shall read below begins by enumerating, as areas of a girl’s education, “tapestry work, silk-weaving, or playing an instrument,” which belonged to the conventional and accepted curriculum since at least 1350. Erasmus concedes that families who introduce their daughters to these activities are “quite right.” But then he moves his argument one step further, and states that the families “would do even better to have them instructed in the humanities.”\(^9\) In other words, he starts out from a concession to conventional practices, which had been accepted at least for two centuries by the time of Erasmus, only in order to introduce a radically new conception of women’s education. The novelty Erasmus introduces is the idea of a humanistic education for women. But then again, that idea was not all too radically new, as it was already in Pizan. But Pizan, as we saw, put forth that argument in a circumlocution, i.e., through the rewriting of Zenobia’s story. The rhetorical strategy in which we find Erasmus engaging in his letter to Queen Catharine is *captatio benevolentiae*,


\(^9\) Italics are mine.
captivating the goodwill of the audience or the reader, through a concession in order that the newer argument may become acceptable.⁠¹⁰ Thus ultimately Erasmus asserts that if the aim is to occupy a girl, “books” and humanistic “study” will keep a girl occupied more than any other activity including traditional feminine manual craft. He moreover argues that reading books “not only forestalls idleness” but also keeps her virtuous in other ways:

Families who will not let their daughters learn a trade because of their status and position in society or because they are already well off are nonetheless quite right to instruct them in tapestry work, silk-weaving, or playing an instrument, to enable them to cheat boredom; they would do even better to have them instructed in the humanities. [...] A girl intent on her books, has no thought for anything else. What is more, when she begins to enjoy study, it will sharpen and stimulate her mind more than any other occupation; others may discourage idleness, but study has the advantage that the more you do the greater the pleasure you obtain and it will keep you occupied even into old age. Finally, reading good books not only forestalls idleness but also fills girls’ minds with the best of principles and inculcates virtue. (85)

Five years before he wrote the *Institutio Christiani matrimonii*, from which the above passage comes, in a letter of 1521 to the French scholar Guillaume Budé, Erasmus had reflected on the same topic of the education of women by providing Thomas More’s daughters as examples of such:

Two things are of the greatest peril to the virtue of young women, idleness and lascivious games, and the love of letters prevents both. Nothing else better protects a spotless reputation and unsullied morals: for they are more securely chaste who are chaste from conscious choice. I do not necessarily reject the advice of those who would provide for their daughter’s virtues through handiwork. Yet there is nothing that more occupies the attention of a young girl than study. [...] Surely the mind must be trained in the cultivation of studies so that it may understand right reason and see what is proper and what is

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advantageous. [...] Now and then we find some young women returning from a sermon able to relate wonderfully well what the preacher said—complete with facial expressions. Others are able to recall either what he said or how he said. More’s daughters are able to repeat nearly the entire sermon, in order and with discrimination [...]. This is how sermons ought to be attended, and it is pleasant to be around people of this sort.\footnote{The Collected Works of Erasmus, vol 2, Ep. 1233.}

As in the passage from the \textit{Vidua Christiana} we have read above, here Erasmus puts forth “the love of letters” as the preventor of “idleness and lascivious games,” which are “of the greatest peril to the virtue of young women.” He does not reject providing virtue through handiwork; he rather concedes to it but stresses that “yet there is nothing that more occupies the attention of a young girl than study.” Important here is also the Erasmian conception that, as in men, education in women must be directed at the mind: “Surely the mind must be trained in the cultivation of studies so that it may understand right reason.” Erasmus considers particularly the grasping of a sermon as a sign and function of learnedness. We see once again the tripartite division of knowledge in Erasmus’ description of the grasping of the sermon. Whereas some women (those who are “able to relate wonderfully well what the preacher said—complete with facial expressions”) understand and duplicate the sermon on the primary, practical level, others are capable of a medium level of skill that combines a little of either side, the practical and the intellectual: “Others are able to recall either what he said or how he said.” For the third group of women, Erasmus gives as examples More’s daughters who, “are able to repeat nearly the entire
sermon, in order and with discrimination.” It is also noteworthy that Erasmus is pleased to be around learned women. In the Coniugium (1523, Marriage), which is a colloquium held between two women, Eulalia and Xanthippe, Eulalia tells of “a certain nobleman, learned and remarkably clever” who “married a girl of seventeen, [...] undertook to teach her literature and music and gradually to accustom her to repeating what she had heard in a sermon; and by other devices to train her in what would be of later use.” Also important in this work is the fact that both of the interlocutors are women. The colloquy was a Renaissance genre with classical Greek origins. Interlocutors in the genre had always been strictly male, as it presented the framework for intellectual exchange.

Erasmus’ more elaborate views on the educated woman appear in his colloquy Abbatis et eruditae (The Abbot and the Learned Lady) which was first published in 1524. In this dialogue there are two interlocutors: Antronius, the abbot, and Magdalia, the learned lady. Scholars assume that Magdalia’s name derives from the name of More’s eldest daughter Margaret Roper, married to William Roper who admired her learning. On the other hand, Antronius is the name of the ass in Apuleius’s work, The Golden Ass. The colloquium takes place in Magdalia’s house, probably in her study. Like Margaret Roper, Magdalia is a married woman whose husband

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12 Colloquies of Erasmus, p. 120.


14 Colloquies of Erasmus, pp. 219-22.
“heartily approves” of her “spending [...] time on books.” Her commitment to study further seems to echo that of the daughters of Thomas More who, Erasmus reports, had declared that, “if something happens that cannot be avoided, I should prefer that they [his daughters] die learned rather than unlearned.”

Antronius finds books “unbecoming both to a young miss and a married woman;” or, as Erasmus would put the same elsewhere: “monks hate books and women love them.” In the above passage, it is noteworthy that a widow is beyond even the consideration of Antronius. French letters, on the other hand, are here synonymous with romances and lyric poetry. On the other hand, Latin was the language of scholars, whereas Greek, rare among men and an extremely rare accomplishment in women, was the mark of highest humanistic learning. Magdalia is seen, like Christine in *Cité des dames*, substituting higher intellectual material for romance and lyric. Christine, it will be remembered, was searching for a volume of lyric poetry

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15 *Colloquies of Erasmus*, p. 220.

16 *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, Ep. 1233.

17 *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, Ep. 2133.
to relieve her mind when she came across the intellectually grave treatise by Mathéolus. Thus Pizan had performed the substitution of serious study for poetry expressly intended for women. Thus we read on:

**Magdalia** Are French books the only ones that teach wisdom?  
**Antronius** But it’s fitting for court ladies to have something with which to beguile their leisure.  
**Magdalia** Are court ladies the only ones allowed to improve their minds and enjoy themselves?  
**Antronius** You confuse growing wise with enjoying yourself. It’s not feminine to be brainy. A lady’s business is to have a good time.

Antronius does answer the remoter implication of Magdalia’s question, “Are French books the only ones that teach wisdom?” Yet the nearer meaning of her question remains unanswered. Here, there is a clear separation between ‘improving one’s mind’ and ‘enjoying oneself’, both of which are the result of reading books—the same distinction we found in Pizan. Once again, we see Antronius defending that it is fitting for a woman to read in French, which includes lyric poetry and romances, since “a lady’s business is to have a good time” and enjoy herself. As we had mentioned in the second chapter, girls were encouraged to read prayer books or poetry and tales in their vernacular languages, which provided a sort of guidance to women besides occupying their time. Since women were directed at the private or domestic sphere rather than the public sphere, they did not need to read and study the ‘heavier’ subjects. They needed to read and were encouraged only “to beguile their leisure.” Magdalia’s other question, “Are court ladies the only ones allowed to improve their minds and enjoy themselves?” also remains unanswered. We also know from the second
chapter that women who belonged to the upper classes were more educated (in comparison to other women). Yet, Magdalia, who asks the question, is not an ordinary woman but a lady of the court. Similarly, Pizan was related to the court, even before she entered, since both her father and husband were in the service of the King. Moreover, Pizan’s example of the learned woman, Zenobia, was a queen. Thus we see that the class-based educational system of the late Middle Ages, described in the second chapter, continued in Erasmus’ culture.

Besides including women interlocutors as in the example of Magdalia, in order to support his argument, Erasmus renders accounts of women who were ‘virtuous’ and exemplary in terms of carrying on their lives. In Vidua Christiana, Erasmus provides numerous examples of women including Eustochium (virgin), Elizabeth (married) and Cornelia (widow). Of course, as already the title of the work indicates, the Vidua Christiana is devoted to drawing up the portrait of the widow. But he emphasises one specific example more than any other, and that is Judith of the Old Testament. In the opening sentence of the Judith passage at which we shall shortly look closely, Erasmus advises the widow to “place before her eyes the example of the widow Judith and follow along in her footsteps” (204). After narrating Judith’s biography and her virtues, in conclusion Erasmus counsels widows once again to behave according to the example she sets.

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18 For references to Judith before this particular passage, see Erasmus on Women, pp. 192, 196-99, 201.
As known, Judith is a Jewish heroine whose legendary feats are told in the apocryphal book bearing her name.\textsuperscript{19} The Book of Judith contains reference to Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. (In other words, we are in Zenobia’s geography.) She is best known for having overcome the Assyrian Nebuchadnezzar’s general Holofernes. According to the story, Holofernes one by one conquers and destroys the Israeli cities and at last comes near the city named Bethulia where Judith lives. The city was located at the height of mountains, so Holofernes decided to cut off its water before attacking and established a camp at a site whence he would be able to survey whether anyone left the city or not. At the time, Judith had been a widow for “three years and four months.”\textsuperscript{20} The inhabitants of the city suffered of thirst and famine and eventually decided to submit to the Assyrians but agreed to hold out five more days. When Judith heard of this decision, she sent her maid to call Ozias and the elders of the city. She talked with them and promised that she and her maid would go and return before the five days were up but she did not explain what they would do in those five days. The elders listened and agreed with her. Judith put on her best garments and jewels, and with her maid left the city. She went to where Holofernes and his army were holding camp. She told Holofernes that she escaped from the Hebrews and that she wanted to help him. Holofernes let her stay in the camp and on the fourth day arranged a feast and invited her


\textsuperscript{20} “Judith,” \textit{The Dartmouth Bible}, 8: 5. Erasmus writes, “for three years and six months she had lived as a widow,” p. 197.
to dine with him. At the end of the night Holofernes, like his men, was so drunk that he fell asleep. Judith went to him and took his scimitar and cut off his head. She brought Holofernes’ head to Bethulia. Then she summoned the army and instructed them to prepare to attack in the morning. In the morning, seeing the Israelites, the Assyrians proceeded to inform Holofernes of the situation. But they discovered that he was dead. They tried to escape in terror. The Israelites pursued them past Damascus.

Erasmus begins the enumeration of Judith’s virtues with her “patriotism.” He tells of how Judith, a widow, encouraged the army, and “restored their hope,” and it was thus that her people won the war:

[Judith] fortified them with wise counsel [...] She alone, one single woman, effected by her piety a victory of which a huge army had despaired. [...] She assumed the role of a general, ordering the people to crush the enemy and scatter them. Finally, when she had won such an illustrious victory, she did not seek to have statues set up for her to have triumphs celebrated (204-205).

Erasmus brings out a characteristic in Judith that is not mentioned in the Apocrypha, namely her wisdom. 21 Although unlike Zenobia, Judith is neither a queen nor by office head of the army, Judith “assumed the role of a general” and is described as being as courageous and skilful as we saw Zenobia was in matters of war. Erasmus asserts that, “she ruled over no territory and held no public office,” but he also repeatedly emphasises the

21 Among instances of reference to Judith’s ‘wisdom’ in the Book of Judith are the following: “For this is not the first day wherein thy wisdom is manifested; but from the beginning of thy days all the people have known thy understanding, because the disposition of thine heart is good” (8: 29-30); “Then her words pleased Holofernes and all his servants; and they marveled at her wisdom, and said, There is not such a woman from one end of the earth to the other, both for beauty of face, and wisdom of words” (11: 20-22). But in the two passages, “wisdom” is not used in the same sense. The first indicates ‘wisdom’ perhaps closer to our sense of the term, viz. judgment, while the second approaches ‘cleverness’.
“authority she exercised among the elders and with the head of the state himself” (204). Thus she is, in a way, above all other men in the country and she governs both the country and army by giving “counsel” to “elders” and “the head of the state.” Besides giving advice, Erasmus’ Judith also takes active role in public matters since she ‘orders’ the army as if she were the “general,” to “crush the enemy.” Just as Pizan narrates that it was Zenobia (and not her husband or her stepson) who defeated Sapor, Erasmus relates the victory as entirely due to Judith and her deeds.

It is noteworthy that it is not only her courage or active role in the public sphere that lead the country to victory but also her ‘wisdom’, which may be identified with her ‘learnedness’. Although Erasmus does not elaborate on the areas of knowledge with which Judith is to be credited in the sense that Pizan had done with Zenobia, he transfers the implications of Judith’s socio-political position to his own day and asks, with her counsellor’s and commander’s status in mind, “who today would tolerate a woman’s reproofs or advice?” This is exceedingly important since with this question, Erasmus explicitly transforms the account of remote history into the question of women’s wisdom and place in contemporary society. Once again this is a gesture comparable to Pizan’s addressing her immediate culture à propos of an ancient queen.

As indicated above, Erasmus begins the enumeration of Judith’s virtues with her “patriotism.” He further asserts that “it is in the nature of outstanding virtue to command reverence and respect from everybody” (204). Of course, a widow would be revered and respected if she displayed
virtuous behaviour, but this behaviour is generally thought in terms of chastity. However, Erasmus does not even mention virtue in the sense of chastity but rather finds the “outstanding virtue” as Judith’s commanding consideration by the elders and the head of the state. Further, toward the end of Judith’s story, Erasmus mentions that, “she did not think of remarrying even though she lived to the age of 105” (205). The expression of her restraint Erasmus cites is that “she embraced” her husband Manasses “with a chaste love, and death did not put an end to this bond between them” (205).

I should like to argue that ‘Judith’ is Erasmus’ version of ‘Zenobia’, and *Vidua Christiana* is Erasmus’ ‘Legend of Good Women’ and his *Cité des dames*. In the women Erasmus takes up in *Vidua Christiana*, he stresses their ‘goodness’ while pointing at their outstanding character. He presents the stories not in the tragic mode as Chaucer had done, but in the genre of *encomium*. None of the stories of these exemplary women are stories of ‘fall’, but rather tell of lives worthy of ‘praise’. In this respect, there is a generic connection between Erasmus’ work and that of Pizan’s. The question then arises, why Erasmus did not represent ‘Zenobia’ as Zenobia but instead gave us the example of an “outstanding and heroic woman” (205) through Judith. The main reason for him not to choose Zenobia, but to represent his case through Judith is that the story of Judith is told in the Bible, or at least among texts related to the Bible. As we have mentioned above, Erasmus consistently relies on the Biblical framework for his defence of women and their education. For this reason, rather than giving
the story of the ancient pagan widow Zenobia, he would have considered it
more suitable to include that of the widow Judith as she derives from texts
adjacent to the Bible. Toward the end of the *Vidua Christiana*, Erasmus
declares this rather explicitly: “None of what I have said so far is derived
from secular sources; I have extracted it all from divine writings” (211).

One may also speculate that, as Erasmus had dedicated the *Vidua
Christiana* to a queen—a religious one, too—Mary of Hungary, Judith
would have provided the best example both in the sense that she derives
from a religious source and that she was, like Mary, a widow with no
children. But the other queen, Catherine of Aragon, to whom he dedicated
the *Institutio Christiani matrimonii*, did have a daughter. We are going to
see in the next chapter that Sir Thomas Elyot, around a little more than a
decade after Erasmus, would include Zenobia in his *Defence of Good
Women*. Though Elyot’s *Defence of Good Women* was written five years
after Catherine’s death, and was dedicated to Anna of Cleves, some scholars
maintain that his Zenobia *is* Catherine, and that Elyot’s treatise is actually
the “defense of one ‘exceptional’ woman, Catherine herself.” But we shall
see that Zenobia is a combination of the characters of the queens of the
time; or rather, Elyot’s own ‘ideal’ creation.

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22 Constance Jordan, “Feminism and the Humanists: The Case of Sir Thomas Elyot’s
7. Zenobia the Queen: Sir Thomas Elyot

Sir Thomas Elyot’s (1490-1546) Defence of Good Women appeared in 1540. The work is a dialogue among three interlocutors: Caninus, Candidus, and Zenobia. Caninus in Latin means ‘dog-like’ whereas Candidus means ‘honest and straightforward’. Throughout the dialogue, Candidus answers the misogynistic attacks of Caninus by describing exemplary women that support his arguments. Toward the end of the dialogue, Zenobia joins them, presenting a ‘living’ example of such woman, and confirms Candidus’ arguments. The outstanding characteristic of Elyot’s text is that, unlike the other accounts of Zenobia we have looked at, here the ancient queen is embodied and becomes an interlocutor in the dialogue as she herself tells of her life. Other accounts are biographical and historical and narrate of Zenobia. In a rare instance we have seen above, Chaucer had lent voice to Zenobia.1 But that was to authenticate what Chaucer took as historical fact. Elyot’s Zenobia has attained full (fictional) personhood; she speaks for herself.2 It is furthermore noteworthy that Elyot includes a woman interlocutor in what was perhaps the highest intellectual genre of discourse ever since ancient Greece, namely the colloquy or dialogue. Interlocutors of

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1 The instance has been cited on p. 37 above.

2 Besides the Boccaccio, Chaucer and Pizan works we have looked at, Zenobia’s story also appears in Vives’ De Institutione (1523; translated into English in 1540, Instruction of a Christian Woman), Agrippa’s De nobilitate praececellentia foeminei (1529; translated into English in 1535, On the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex), and in Lydgate’s Fall of Princes (c. 1430). But these are brief historical accounts of Zenobia and even Lydgate only mentions her name while telling of Aurelian.
this genre had been strictly men. Christine de Pizan’s Cité des dames was, of course, a dialogue among female interlocutors. One speaker, moreover, was Pizan’s autobiographical persona, by which the author was apparently inserting herself into the space of public discourse. But Christine’s three guests were allegorical figures, which immediately withdrew the dialogue from the public sphere. The additional fact that the colloquium in the Cité des dames took place in Christine’s study, of course lent intellectual aura to the speech, yet placed it inside the home, the private and domestic sphere.

Elyot, on the other hand, not only gives voice to Zenobia, but depicts her as a visitor to Candidus’ house. By including Zenobia as an interlocutor, Elyot displays her in the public sphere and thus gives her voice in public speech. Needless to say, the fact that she is a queen, aids Elyot in this strategy.

Before her entrance, Zenobia is described by Candidus. The information we are given here is known historico-biographical information: Zenobia is a widow, and a defeated and captive queen who, moreover, is under house arrest. This yet-hypothetical Zenobia fully is situated according to historiographic convention: she is the ancient queen of Palmyra whose story is familiar to us from Boccaccio, Chaucer and Pizan. Situating Zenobia thus makes her hosts Candidus and Caninus into two Romans living in the third century in the city where Zenobia has retired after having been defeated by Aurelian. Candidus reports to Caninus that he is housing

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3 I have not been able to look at Plato’s one dialogue in which Socrates discourses with a woman, Aspasia. It seems to be a rarely edited text. However, Elyot seems to have read this dialogue, and hence know of the rare instance of a colloquy including a woman. See Sir Thomas Elyot, The Defence of Good Women, ed. Edwin Johnson Howard (Oxford: Miami University Anchor Press, 1940), p. 45.
Zenobia in his court and that evening he has invited her to supper.

Candidus’ words are the following:

Sir there dwells here by me a lady, late a great queen and wife to Odenatus king of Palmirie, which is a city and country around Surry, her name is Zenobia: she has had our host victory twice and now late was taken prisoner by Aurelian the emperor, all be it for her nobility, virtue, and courage, she was pardoned of her life, and a fair house is appointed to her in this village.4

It is apparent from his depiction of Zenobia as the prisoner of Aurelian that Elyot had read Boccaccio’s account of Zenobia. Neither Chaucer nor Pizan, though their purposes were entirely different, included the conclusion of Boccaccio’s story which had informed that Aurelian allowed Zenobia to retire to “an estate near Tivoli” where “she grew old with her children, wearing private attire among Roman matrons.”5 As we have seen, in Chaucer the story concluded with Zenobia’s humiliation in Aurelian’s procession, since this was the important point for the queen’s ‘tragic fall’. On the other hand, Pizan had concluded her version of the Zenobia story with “the high point of her virtues” which was “her profound learnedness in letters,” without even mentioning Aurelian’s name.6 There is an explicit difference in Elyot’s version from that of Boccaccio’s account. Boccaccio had only mentioned that Zenobia was allowed to retire to a city, but Elyot

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4 Elyot, The Defence of Good Women, p. 49. Page numbers of citations from this work henceforward will be indicated in the text.


elaborates on the subject and asserts that because of “her nobility, virtue, and courage, she was pardoned of her life.”

Moreover, while Boccaccio had concluded his story at this point, Elyot envisages Zenobia living in that Roman city. This, of course, enables Elyot to depict Zenobia according to will by using the information he has gathered from other stories about her life and personality. Elyot transforms the historical account of Zenobia into the question of the education of women in contemporary culture. In fact, we have seen that Erasmus with his Judith story and Pizan with that of her Zenobia had done the same; they used these ancient women as the circumlocutionary figures of talking about contemporary culture. Similarly, Elyot leans on the historical figure of Zenobia. But he gathers what had been said about the ancient queen and gives the information in a compact form with Candidus’ introductory description of Zenobia to both Caninus and the reader. The rest of Elyot’s Zenobia is his own creation independent of his sources since none of those sources included what had happened after Zenobia retired to Rome. Thus besides embodying and objectifying Zenobia, Elyot approaches fiction with his version of the queen, yet he depicts the figure of Zenobia in order to comment on the position of women in contemporary culture.

Candidus continues his speech with the topic of Zenobia’s learnedness: “she is well learned in Greek, and does competently understand Latin, but excellently the Egyptian language. She herself teaches her children good letters, and being now vacant from other business, writes as they say of Alexander and the orient eloquent stories” (49-50). As Boccaccio and Pizan
had done, Elyot enumerates the languages Zenobia knows: Greek, Latin and Egyptian. Similarly to Pizan, Elyot omits the Syrian language which had been in Boccaccio’s list. Besides, despite the fact that Boccaccio claims that Zenobia had “sons,” Elyot, like Pizan, suppresses this fact and refers to her offspring simply as Zenobia’s “children.” The learning of her children, on the other hand, differs from the versions of Boccaccio and Pizan in the sense that Elyot asserts that “she herself teaches” them. As we have seen, Boccaccio had mentioned that Zenobia’s children “were ordered to speak Latin,” whereas Pizan only indicated that they were “introduced to learning,” broadening the spectrum of the children’s studies. In Elyot, since Zenobia is not a queen any longer, she is at leisure to tutor her children, but similarly to Pizan, Elyot also does not mention what they are being taught. Thirty-six years after Elyot, in 1576—probably having read Elyot’s treatise—George Pettie, in *A petite Pallace*, would cite Zenobia as an example to support his idea that “it is evident that women are rather the author of learning, then any way inferior to men in learning” and would write that “Zenobia [...] her selfe taught them,” i.e., her children.7

Beyond the study of history, in Elyot too, Zenobia acquires authorial capacity: “being now vacant from other business, [Zenobia] writes as they say of Alexander and the orient eloquent stories.” Whereas Boccaccio had stated that she learned the histories of the cultures with which she was likely to come in contact, Pizan asserted that “she organised and arranged all historical works in concise and very careful form” while still a queen. Elyot,

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besides indicating further Zenobia’s studies in history, makes her into nothing less than an author in the field of history. Pizan’s historical compiler has become historical author. Thus too, even before Zenobia is included in the dialogue, we know, in detail, who she is and what her accomplishments are.

Having told of Zenobia, Candidus asserts that he has invited Zenobia to supper. Caninus does not like the idea:

   Candidus [...] I have boden her to supper, it will not now be long or she come hither, And when we do hear her, I dare well say, you will be changed from your opinion, and confess, that in women is both courage, constance, and reason.
   Caninus But I pray you of this matter say to her nothing.
   Candidus Ah, I see well you be loath to come to a reckoning. Thus do they all that be of your fashion. In wise women’s absence speak reproachfully, and when they be present, flatter them pleasantly (50-51).

We see that Candidus planned to introduce Caninus and Zenobia, in order to convince Caninus and make him “confess, that in women is both courage, constance, and reason.” But Caninus does not want to discuss the matter with a woman, and says “But I pray you of this matter say to her nothing.” Then Candidus claims that Caninus, “in wise women’s absence speak[s] reproachfully, and when they be present, flatter[s] them pleasantly.” It is at this point that Zenobia enters the scene:

   Candidus [...] But lo where she comes, let us meet with her. Your ladyship is very heartily welcome.
   Zenobia You have caused me to do, that I have used very seldom.
   Candidus What is that madame?
   Zenobia To be out of my own house at this time of the night.
Candidus I thank therefore your ladyship. For I think the same, but I will promise you, nothing shall come to your hearing or sight, but that both to hear and see may stand with your worship.

Zenobia That I heartily praise you, for the remembrance of my princely estate may not sustain words of dishonesty. And because I am now as a private person, I fear the common success of familiarity.

Candidus What is that madame I pray you heartily.

Zenobia For I dread infamy, I tell you plainly, more than ever I did the loss of my liberty.

Candidus No such thing shall happen madame I promise you truly. For here you shall find no men but of honest condition (51-52).

As soon as Zenobia meets them, she declares that she rarely goes out of her “own house at this time of the night.” Candidus approves the way she thinks but adds that “nothing shall come to your hearing or sight, but that both to hear and see may stand with your worship.” Zenobia states that she “fear[s] the common success of familiarity” which is, as she explains, “infamy.” Elyot depicts Zenobia as extremely sensitive about public dishonour: “I dread infamy, I tell you plainly, more than ever I did the loss of my liberty.” This elaboration owes mainly to the fact that Elyot feels obliged to justify the inclusion of a woman interlocutor in the dialogue. This justification was necessary in so far as Elyot was writing against a generic tradition of the kind explained above: as the prime genre of public discourse, political and pedagogic, the colloquy explicitly excluded women. Further, unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Pizan, Elyot includes neither Zenobia’s childhood nor her sexual attitude toward her husband and thereby the topic of her chastity. The issue of sexual chastity has here been transformed into the fear of “infamy” Zenobia feels by her entrance into the gentleman’s salon, which is, we may surmise, the fear of “infamy” Elyot
himself feels by his insertion of Zenobia into public discourse. Elyot also
does not pay much attention to Zenobia’s military abilities which had been
termed ‘manly’ by Boccaccio.

After this point in the dialogue, until the end, we see Zenobia making
long speeches and the other two essentially listening to her. Zenobia tells of
how she has moved through the three stages—virginity, marriage and
widowhood—which Erasmus had described. Significantly, this Zenobia tells
of herself in the framework of her learning in “moral philosophy” and builds
up her life stages accordingly: “my study in moral philosophy, wherein I
spent the years between sixteen and twenty” (55). In the very first sentence
of her long speech, Zenobia declares that she studied “moral philosophy.” It
is noteworthy that Elyot ascribes prime place to moral philosophy in
Zenobia’s curriculum, since the crux of the humanist conception of learning
was the subject of ethics. In fact, as Raphael Falco argues, Elyot was one of
the earliest defenders of the new humanistic curriculum in England.8

At this point, we ought to turn from comparing Elyot’s Zenobia with
Pizan’s, directly to comparing the English author’s queen with Pizan
herself. Like Pizan, Elyot’s Zenobia apparently studied until she got
married; she points out that she “spent the years between sixteen and
twenty,” studying moral philosophy, and married at twenty. But giving up
studies upon marriage is not the only similarity between Elyot’s Zenobia
and Pizan. Zenobia asserts that, “when I had been out of the dread of my

8 Raphael Falco, *Conceived Presences: Literary Genealogy in Renaissance
father (who kept me in this study continually) and had once tasted the pleasant devises, which are provided for queens and other great ladies, you may well suppose I should sooner have lost that delectation, which I had in study” (57-58). As the reader may remember, it was Pizan’s father who had supported her studies as a young girl. The historical Pizan and the fictional Zenobia both quit their studies once they come out of the father’s jurisdiction and enter the husband’s. Like Pizan, it is only after the loss of her husband that Zenobia recognises the value of learning and by free will, returns to study: “after the death of my husband, I found learning a marvelous treasure” (59). Thus, we see that Elyot’s Zenobia for the most part resembles Pizan herself. It should also be mentioned that none of the sources of Elyot—neither Boccaccio, nor Chaucer, nor even Pizan—links Zenobia’s learning with her father’s support or her husband’s death. It is significant that the model for Elyot’s Zenobia is to be found not in the previous Zenobia texts but in ‘real’ historical persons like Pizan. The likes of Pizan were slowly multiplying in Elyot’s time. Thomas More’s daughters were, after all, Elyot’s contemporaries.

Elyot’s Zenobia elaborates on what she has gained by studying moral philosophy:

I perceived, that without prudence and constancy, women might be brought lightly into error and folly, and made therefore unmeat for that company, whereunto they were ordained: I mean, to be assistance and comfort to man through their fidelity, which other beasts are not, except they be by the force of man thereto constrained. I found also, that Justice teaches us women, to honor our husbands next after God: which honor rests in due obedience, whereby mutual love between them is in a more servence. For undoubtedly no woman him loves,
whose hate or displeasure she nothing fears. Also Justice restrains us to do any thing, which is not seemly. By fortitude are we still kept in a virtuous constancy, as well in resisting affections and wanton persuasion, as also to sustain (when they do happen) afflictions patiently. But in a woman, no virtue is equal to Temperance, whereby in her words and deeds she always uses a just moderation, knowing when time is to speak, and when to keep silence, when to be occupied, and when to be merry. And is she measure it to the will of her husband, she does the more wisely: except it may turn them both to loss or dishonesty. Yet then should she seem rather to give him wise counsel, than to appear disobedient or sturdy. In every [sic] of these things consisted my duty, which I should not so well have known, if to my husband I had sooner be wedded (55-57).

The explanation Zenobia gives is nothing but a declaration of Erasmus’ thoughts about the uses of education for women; or rather, it reflects the broader humanistic attitude, found in Erasmus too, to the education of the human. Given the fact that humanistic education was intended to produce the individual of public consciousness and competence, this approach to women’s education integrated ‘woman’ in the ‘human’. Moreover, Elyot explicitly depicts Zenobia as an ‘ideal’ Christian woman that fits into the humanist conceptions. His Zenobia is far from representing the third-century pagan woman Candidus’ introduction had prepared us for. Elyot even makes Zenobia believe in ‘God’ and has her utter words that are almost Biblical, more precisely, Pauline: “I found also, that Justice teaches us women, to honor our husbands next after God: which honor rests in due obedience, whereby mutual love between them is in a more servence.”

In the rest of the dialogue, Zenobia tells of how she comported herself after her husbands death:
For when I considered the state of things, which then happened
together, what danger was to the realm imminent for lack of a
governor, and that my children for their tender youth should be little
regarded, and I being a woman, should nothing be feared. Also what
tutors my children should have, it was very uncertain (59).

She states that what she first considered was that her husband’s death would
give way to lack of authority. Zenobia explains the reason for this anxiety as
owing to the fact that her children were at a young age and she was a
woman. Then she tells of the situation the country was in:

Ambition always reigning in every country, which can not gladly
suffer in any one person such manner of sovereignty, that under the
name of protection, he should have in subjection all the nobility. And
although that such one might happen to be, yet having in
remembrance as well ancient histories as late examples, I dradde, least
in so great authority [,] Ambition and Avarice might cause men to
forget their obedience [,] trust and fidelity. I considered also, that the
realm of Palmyry, was environed with enemies. For on the one side
was the host of the Romans, which always waited to find opportunity,
to envade my realm, and to subdue it under their empire. The thieves
of Araby were on the other side, which already were entered the
marches, and spoiled the country. The king of Media, to be discharged
of his tribute, joined with our enemies, willing to bring my realm in
perpetual captivity (59-60).

Here, the state of “Palmyry” is envisaged as if it were that of England in
Elyot’s time. Zenobia tells of the ‘inner’ problems that are “Ambition and
Avarice” which may lead anyone to “forget their obedience [,] trust and
fidelity,” and that, “having in remembrance as well ancient histories as late
examples,” she decided to take control with “great authority.” As Dennis J.
O’Brien points out, “perhaps Elyot here has in mind the ‘late example’ of
Richard III. As is known, when King Edward IV died in 1483, he left his twelve-year-old son Edward V as his successor. However, Richard of Gloucester, Edward IV’s brother, who was made protector to the young successor, usurped the throne. “[T]he bloudie king” Richard III, who “vnlawfullie made drunke with innocents bloud,” including that of Edward V, was feared and detested by many during his two-year reign. Thus Elyot’s Zenobia may have fear for her sons. There was also the problem “that the realm of Palmyry, was environed with enemies.” Zenobia enumerates “Romans,” “the thieves of Araby,” and “the king of Media” as their enemies. Romans wanted Palmyra in order “to subdue it under their empire,” whereas the King of Media wanted “perpetual captivity.” The thieves of Araby had already started to spoil the country. If “Palmyry” was indeed Elyot’s allegory for England—after all, he had probably read Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) as example of socio-political allegory—the ancient kingdom’s situation, as described here, is reminiscent of England in 1540: since 1525, England had come increasingly under the threat of the Habsburg Emperor Charles V who had conquered Spain, Burgundy, the Netherlands and Austria, and was now, in 1540, bent on Henry VIII’s England (in 1541-42, there began a war between Henry VIII and Charles

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V). France was another threat, and Henry negotiated both powers through constantly changing alliances.

Zenobia asserts that, under these circumstances where the country was practically besieged, she decided to rule the country, and tells of how she ‘goverened’ the empire:

After that I had little bethought[t] me, I determined to prepare remedies quickly, and to sustain fortune at all times patiently. And to the intent that the name of a woman, should not among the people be had in contemps, I used so my proceedings, that none of them might be said to be done womanly. Wherefore I stayed always abroad among my nobles and counselors, and said my opinion, so that it seemed to them all, that it stood with good reason. I came often times among the people, and remembered unto them, the liberty and honor which they had received, by the excellent prowess of my noble husband, showing to them my children, which for tender age than were but feeble, exhorting them with sundry orations to retain their fidelity. I visited all the whole realm and the marches, reedified fortresses, and new made also sund ammunitions. Moreover, I caused good laws to be published, observing them first in my own household, and caused them in all other places to be well executed. I made Justice chief ruler of my affection, and in all consultations would I be present, where I heard all other speak first, that I would not be ignorant: and then showed my advise, wherein I seemed, not to be negligent. Touching my servants I used such a diligent scrutiny, that they were always persons of singular honesty (61-62).

Rather than telling of the wars Zenobia fought, Elyot makes Zenobia hold forth about her conception of government. She tells of how she also “visited all the whole realm and the marches, reedified fortresses, and new made also sund ammunitions. Moreover, I caused good laws to be published, observing them first in my own household, and caused them in all other places to be well executed.” Similarly to Zenobia’s Palmyra, Henry VIII’s England met with new regulations and laws especially in the years
1532-1540. The new statutes determined that the king himself was bounded both by the laws and the legislations of the parliament. Nevertheless, justice was not the “chief ruler” of England as Henry VIII, despite these newly introduced laws, continued to repress and even execute his opponents regardless of whether they were courtiers and aristocrats. On the other hand, Zenobia asserts that she, “made Justice chief ruler of my affection, and in all consultations would I be present, where I heard all other speak first, that I would not be ignorant: and then showed my advise, wherein I seemed, not to be negligent.”

O’Brien states that Elyot “depicts Zenobia as one who [...] not only governs her country wisely and well, according to reason and restraint, but also pursues a fairly gender-neutral pacifist foreign policy which nevertheless enables her to enlarge her empire.”

Elyot’s Zenobia is not an aggressor, but rather claims that she “quietly governed the realm of Palmirie”:

By this manner of industry I quietly governed the realm of Palmirie. And also added much more to my empire, not so much by force, as by renovme of trust and politic governance, which all men had in such admiration, that diverse of our said enemies, which against the realm erst did conspire, and had invaded my jurisdiction, chase rather to leave their hostility, and to remain in our subjection, than to return to their own country. To the which wisdom and policy I attained by the study of noble philosophy (63).

Zenobia tells of how she “added much more to my empire, not so much by force,” but rather by the mere fact that people preferred “to remain in our

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subjection,” by their own will entering the ‘commonwealth’. But most significantly for our topic, she explicitly attributes her achievements in government to her “wisdom and policy I attained by the study of noble philosophy.”

Toward the very end of the dialogue, after Zenobia has told her entire story, Caninus is convinced “that women, being well and virtuously brought up, do not only with men participate in reason, but some also in fidelity and constancy be equal unto them”:

**Candidus** [...] How say you Caninus, be you any thing changed in your opinion?
**Caninus** I would never have looked for such a conclusion. I see well enough, that women, being well and virtuously brought up, do not only with men participate in reason, but some also in fidelity and constancy be equal unto them.
**Candidus** Madam your supper is ready, may it like you to enter in toward it.
**Zenobia** With right good will: but yet if this gentleman has ought to say against women, I am not unproviced for to defend them.
**Caninus** No madame, I am by your ladyship already satisfied, he is wise that with reason is shortly contented. And where reason serves not, silence is prayed (65).

It is rather noteworthy that, despite the several exemplary women Candidus had provided throughout—like Leoncium, Cleobulina, Casandra and Carmentis—Caninus had resisted, insisting on his misogynistic ideas. It is only after the appearance of Zenobia on the scene that he is left with nothing to say against women and accepts their value in society. Thus, Constance Jordan argues that,
victory is Candidus’ alone, for Zenobia despite her virtue, remains the captive of the Emperor Aurelianus and among the conquered not the conquering. Her character has a certain pathos, and one is tempted to think that Elyot, who had nothing to say about courageous and intelligent women in any of his other works, wrote the *Defence* somewhat half-heartedly and perhaps to fulfil an obligation.12

Although Jordan argues that Zenobia’s “character has a certain pathos,” we do not see Elyot depicting Zenobia’s story as a ‘fall’. As mentioned above in the third chapter, it is Chaucer’s version that considered Zenobia’s story as an account of tragic fate and thus his version was revised according to the pathos. On the other hand, Jordan states that Elyot, “wrote the *Defence* somewhat half-heartedly and perhaps to fulfil an obligation.” The reason she puts forth is that Elyot, “had nothing to say about courageous and intelligent women in any of his other works.” On the one hand, Elyot by no means had to write a work in praise of women. Also, by depicting Zenobia as a queen ruling her country by herself and with great success, Elyot grants to Zenobia the very educational values he argued as necessary for a boy to be brought up by to ‘govern’, in his *The Boke Named the Governour*. And thus Elyot makes his ‘educated’ Zenobia able “to govern her country more successfully (and ironically, more peacefully) than most European countries—including England—were then governed,” as O’Brien puts it.13 I do not agree with Jordan’s statement that “Zenobia despite her virtue, remains the captive of the Emperor Aurelianus and among the conquered not the conquering,”

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since Elyot, as mentioned above, chooses this setting, \textit{which was not included in any of his sources}, in order to depict a new version of Zenobia. Also, how could he make Zenobia speak of her reign and her success, and of how she utilised her learning throughout her life, except in this retirement scene?

Now let us return to the matter of, in whose—\textit{which historical queen’s}—“defence” this work was written. As pointed out in the closing of the Erasmus chapter above, Jordan points out that some scholars maintain that Elyot’s Zenobia is Catherine of Aragon, and that Elyot’s treatise is actually the “defense of one ‘exceptional’ woman, Catherine herself.”\textsuperscript{14} The argument is based on the fact that both Zenobia and Catherine, the first wife of Henry VIII, were imprisoned with their children. On the other hand, we know that \textit{The Defence of Good Women} was dedicated to the new Queen of England, Anna of Cleves.

Anna of Cleves was the fourth wife of Henry VIII and the couple were married in January 1540, the same year Elyot dedicated his work to the new queen. Their marriage was very short-lived; it lasted less than a year. The main reason for the marriage were Anna’s Lutheran connections, which were very important for the time in terms of Henry’s domestic reformation politics. Anna of Cleves descended from a German family, and she was very different from English noblewomen both in upbringing and manner. Unlike Henry VIII’s previous wives, Anna had no musical accomplishments or any

\textsuperscript{14} Jordan, “Feminism and the Humanists,” pp. 185-86.
artistic talent. Besides, she was entirely alien to England since she even did not know any language except her Dutch.\textsuperscript{15} Also, even her physical appearance was not liked by Henry. They were soon divorced. As Antonia Fraser puts it, Anna of Cleves remained in court, as the “ugly sister” of Henry VIII, rather than his wife or the Queen of England.\textsuperscript{16} Her position in the English court very much resembled that of Zenobia’s in Candidus’. Although attitudes toward her were completely ‘xenophobic’ in the sense that no one, including the King, accepted her, she was loyal to Henry VIII. On the other hand, Catherine of Aragon who was appreciated on account of her learnedness especially in Latin, as known, rejected the subjection to Henry and thus was imprisoned with her daughter Mary. But we should not forget that not only Catherine but also Henry’s second wife Anne Boleyn were very much learned. I do not think that Elyot had in mind only one ‘exceptional’ woman while he was writing the \textit{Defence of Good Women}. We may only surmise that he gathered excerpts from the lives of the first four wives of Henry, since none of their character and life in itself fits Elyot’s Zenobia. On the other hand, it is absurd to think that Elyot simply reflected what he had seen since it is explicit that he not only depended on actual happenings. I argue that with the character of Zenobia, he


\textsuperscript{16} For Anna of Cleves and her marriage to Henry VIII, see Fraser, \textit{The Wives of Henry VIII}, pp. 287-330.
depicted—as Aristotle terms it—what rather should be than what was.\textsuperscript{17}

Considering also the fact that the king being then forty-eight years old, and having two daughters and a sickly son, Elyot the courtier would have been preoccupied with how the country should be reigned and that (if need be) it could be reigned by a woman.

Elyot’s \textit{Defence of Good Women} not only included women in the public sphere, but also extended this inclusion beyond the scope of the Erasmian recommendation of humanistic education for women. Zenobia’s story allowed Elyot to display nothing less than a queen who is, if not more, at least intelligent enough to govern herself and the commonwealth. Thus Elyot goes farther than Erasmus and transforms the household of the educated widow into the realm of the widow queen.

\textsuperscript{17} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1995) IX.i: “it is not the poet’s function to relate actual events, but the \textit{kinds} of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity.”
8. Epilogue

From the late medieval Christine de Pizan to the early modern Thomas Elyot, the argument concerning the education of women as the justification of women’s entrance into the public sphere was founded upon the notion of the outstanding case of the widow. And when, twelve years after Elyot’s death, Elizabeth, who had received a thorough humanistic education early and rigorously, and who had translated Boethius’ *Consolatio philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*) into English at the age of nine, appeared on the English throne in 1558, she seemed the fulfilment of the argument for educating girls and women. Elizabeth was of course no widow, but the perpetual virgin. Thus the figure of Zenobia would mingle with that of Elizabeth and preserve continuity. At least in England, versions of the Zenobia story would be included in many poems, didactic prose works and even dramatic plays.

In the thirtieth year of Elizabeth’s reign, in 1588, James Aske would write *Elizabetha triumphans* in celebration of the defeat of the Spanish Armada by the English naval forces which was perhaps the high point of the ‘triumphs’ of Queen Elizabeth. Thus the poem was a celebration of Elizabeth’s victory; or, to put it in Aske’s words, the poem was written as “a declaration [...] of the ouerthrow [of] the Spanish fleete briefly, truly, and effectually set foorth.” In the fourth line of *Elizabetha triumphans* Aske directly compared Queen Elizabeth with Queen Zenobia:
Elizabeth sole rector of this Land,
L Long time with thee hath raigned happy Peace:
I In all thy deeds assisteth Pallas hand,
Z Zenobia-like thy Fame shall never cease.
A All other Soyles throughout the wondrous world
B Behold and see thy sweete prosperitie:
E Euen by thy force of late they soone were thrald,
T That falsely bragged of their dietie.
H Honor, with Peace, Prosperitie, and Fame
A Accord with thee, and highly praise thy name. ¹

Later, in 1601, Robert Chester’s Cantoes Alphabet-wise to faire Phoenix made by the Paphian Doue would appear as a 168 line poem:

Zenobia at thy feete I bend my knee,
For thou art Queene and Empresse of my hart,
All blessed hap and true felicity,
All pleasures that the wide world may impart,
Befall thee for gracious good desart:
Accept my meaning as it fits my turne,
For I with thee to ashes meane to burne. ²

The above stanza is the last stanza of Cantoes Alphabet-wise. From the beginning of the poem, each stanza is signified with a letter of the alphabet and thus the poem develops according to the order of the letters, or, as the title of the poem indicates, “Alphabet-wise.” It culminates with the letter Z, this being the last letter of the alphabet. The very first time an addressee appears in the poem is this final stanza dedicated to the letter Z: Zenobia. Thus the whole poem seems to be written to declare that, “Zenobia at thy feete I bend my knee/For thou art Queene and Empresse of my hart.”

¹ James Aske, Elizabetha triumphans (London: Thomas Orwin, 1588).
² Robert Chester, Cantoes Alphabet-wise to faire Phoenix made by the Paphian Doue in Loves Martyr: or, Rosalins complaint (London: E. B., 1601), ll. 162-168.
The metaphor of Zenobia, which was established in the latter part of the English Renaissance through Queen Elizabeth, continued to signify the Queen of England after Elizabeth, too. Ben Jonson was going to include Zenobia in his *Masqve of Qveens*, which was performed before Queen Anne, James I’s wife, in 1609. In the play, the allegorical father figure Hiroiqve Vertve identifies Zenobia as “The Vertuous Palmyrene, Zenobia.” Then Fame, the daughter of Hiroiqve Vertve, tells of the lives of the queens, including Zenobia’s, enumerated by Hiroiqve Vertve, according to “the rule of *Chronologie*.” Jonson, though, does not include “chast” Zenobia’s learnedness, but tells the audience that “she made Orations to her soldiers,” and, for the ancient queen’s account, directly refers to “Trebellivs Pollio”—who was thought, then as now, to have written the *Historia Augusta*, Boccaccio’s source for Zenobia.

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