

Three ballades by Christine de Pizan

Translated by Maryann Corbett

Christine de Pizan (1364—c. 1430) was the first woman in France, and possibly in Europe, known to have supported herself and her family by means of her writing. She took up the pen after the death of her husband and produced several collections of poems, although she is best known now for her prose works on the role of women, such as *The City of Ladies*. She was the initiator of the feminist side of two important literary discussions: the exchange known as the “debate (querelle) on the Romance of the Rose” and the four-hundred-year-long “debate on women (querelle des femmes).” She can be considered the West’s first protofeminist and the first woman humanist, in the Renaissance sense of that term.

Both the themed collection *Cent Balades d’Amant et de Dame* (One Hundred Ballades of a Lover and a Lady) and the miscellany *Autres Balades* (Other Ballades) were written while Christine was very much involved in the defense of women’s roles. These translations are a loose and irreverent take on her position.

**Ballade 2, from
One Hundred Ballades of a Lover and a Lady**

The lady responds to the lover's first sally.

Love is unknown to me. The least desire to learn
is absent from my thought. My mind's on other things,
so your hope's vain. Take off your wild imaginings:

I don't return
such love; it is not proper for a lady who
esteems her reputation. I regret your pains,
but love's not in my plans—not yours, not any man's.

Against a love like that I mean to be on guard.
I thank God that I won't be taken in the nets
that snare so many, to their great unhappiness.

For my own good,
I've passed them by so far and will pass by again
sweet spoken words and billets-doux in graceful hands.
Love isn't in my plans. Not yours, not any man's.

I don't know how to give you any other answer.
Don't talk about it further. I'm already weary
of listening. Go declare your passion to some other
lady, because such pleas as yours will get no hearing.

Whoever tries
is spending effort in a foolish enterprise.
Love isn't in my plans. Not yours, not any man's.

Dismiss these notions, please. I tire of your demands.
Love isn't in my plans. Not yours, not any man's.

Balade II, Cent Balades d'Amant et de Dame: original

Oncques ne sceu qu'est amer, ne aprendre
Encore n'y vueil, alieurs suis apensee,
Par quoy en vain vous pourriez atendre ;
Je vous le dy, ostés en vos pensee,

Car ne m'en tient

Ne telle amour a dame n'appartient
Qui ayme honneur, si ne vous en soit grief,
Car vous ne autre je ne vueil amer brief.

Et me quid bien de telle amour deffendre,
La Dieu mercy, ne seray enlasee
Es las d'amour dont aux autres mal prendre
Communement je voy et ja passee

—Bien m'en avient—

M'en suis long temps, encores ne m'en tient,
Qui que m'en parle, escripse lettre ou brief,
Car vous ne autre je ne vueil amer brief.

Si ne vous sçay autre response rendre,
Plus n'en parlez, et desja suis lasee
De l'escouter ; aillieurs vous alez redre
Car cy n'iert ja vo requeste passee.

Et qui y vient

Fait grant folour, car point ne me revient
Si faicte amour, nul n'en vecdroit a chief,
Car vous ne autre je ne vueil amer brief.

N'y pensez plus, le vous dy derechief,
Car vous ne autre je ne vueil amer brief.

Ballade 17, from *Other Ballades*

Back when Circe the sorceress
changed into pigs the warrior Greeks,
Ulysses yanked them from that mess
by dint of certain canny tricks.
But for some men I'm furious with,
that wouldn't be a just outcome
since they're more vile than pigs in filth.
No insult's bad enough for them.

They're braggarts, short on battle-fame,
with gear that's good for looking at,
proud of their noble family names
although their bodies run to fat,
and yet they're not ashamed of that.
One hardly dares to say such stuff:
they've little fondness for the right.
Is there a libel cruel enough?

There is no lady, right or wrong,
of high or humble situation,
who's safe from wounding by the tongues
they wag about her reputation.
Calmly twisting rumor's knife,
smearing, they make themselves unclean,
more pleased with murder than with life.
For that, no insult is too mean.

I'm not a fan of insults, but
for worse-than-Judases, it's tough
as they're so fond of lies and smut.
For them, no insult's bad enough.

Balade XVII from *Autres Balades*: original

Jadis Circes l'enchanteresse
Fist chevaliers devenir porcs;
Mais Ulixes par sa sagece
De ce meschief les gitta hors.
Mais je ne sçay se c'est droit sors
D'aucunes gens, dont j'ay grant yre,
Qui sont plus que pors vilz et ors,
N'on n'en pourroit assez mesdire.

Grans vanteurs sont et sanz proece,
Mais très bien parez par dehors,
Orgueilleux pour leur gentillece,
Et tiennent bien aise leurs corps;
Mais en eulx a maint mal remors,
Et combien qu'on ne l'ose dire
A bien faire n'ont pas amors,
N'on n'en pourroit assez mesdire.

Il n'est nulle si grant maistrece,
Ne femme autre, soit droit ou tors,
Que leur fausse langue ne blece
Leur bon renom; aise sont lors
Quant ilz en font mauvais rapors,
Qui s'i voudra mirer s'y mire,
Mais mieulx que vifs vaulsissent mors,
N'on n'en pourroit assez mesdire.

Je ne mesdi de nullui, fors
D'aucuns qui sont de Judas pire
Et sont de tous mauvais accors,
N'on n'en pourroit assez mesdire.

Ballade 7, from *Other Ballades*

*Juno is the goddess of marriage,
and Christine the widow bemoans the lack of her help.
She prefers a goddess of wisdom and independence.*

If I could get to know Pallas Athena,
Then I'd be set, because I'd never lack
good things; I might begin to feel some comfort.
Perhaps I'd learn how to endure the fact
that Fortune's charged me with too great a burden,
one I'm too weak to carry unless she—
Pallas—will help and grasp the other handle
with her great strength. God help me not to stumble,
since Juno's been no help at all to me.

Pallas, Venus, and Juno long ago
went before Paris: each one pled the case
that her own powers outshone the other two
as did the fine perfections of her face.
Paris, who saw his chance, knew what to do
and made his mind up that he ought to rule
for Venus as the worthiest of the three,
saying: Lady, I grant the prize to you
since Juno is no help at all to me.

The golden apple clinched it; Venus solved
his Helen problem. Evil and defeat
came after, though I needn't speak of those,
except that my own heart would find it sweet
had Pallas won her suit. She puts away
misdeeds; she gives with generosity.
If she would have me, I would be her slave,
and then I wouldn't have to beg the favors
I lack since Juno's been no help to me.

Their discord in this fable notwithstanding,
their work holds up the world, these mighty three.
But let the gods remember me to Pallas,
since Juno's been no help at all to me.

Ballade VII, from *Autres Ballades*: original

Se de Pallas me peüsse accointier
Joye et tout bien ne me fauldroit jamais;
Car par elle je seroie ou sentier
De reconfort, et de porter le fais
Que Fortune a pour moy trop chargier fais;
Mais foible suis pour soustenir
Si grant faissel, s'elle ne vient tenir
De l'autre part, par son poissant effort
Pour moy aidier, Dieu m'i doint avenir,
Car de Juno n'ay je nul reconfort.

Pallas, Juno, Venus voudrent plaidier
Devant Paris jadis de leurs tors fais,
Dont chascune disoit qu'a son cuidier
Plus belle estoit, et plus estoit parfais
Ses grans pouvoirs que de l'autre en tous fais;
Sus Paris s'en voudrent tenir,
Qui lors jugia que l'en devoit tenir
A plus belle Venus et a plus fort,
Si dist: «Dame, vous vueil je detenir,
Car de Juno n'ay je nul reconfort.»

Pour la pomme d'or lui vint puis aidier
Vers Heleine Venus, mors et deffais
En fu après; si n'ay d'elle mestier,
Mais de joye seroit mon cuer reffais,
Se la vaillant Pallas, par qui meffais
Sont delaissié et retenir
Fait tous les biens, me daignoit retenir
Pour sa serve: plus ne devroie au fort
Ja desirer pour a grant bien venir,
Car de Juno n'ay je nul reconfort.

Ces trois poissans deesses maintenir
Font le monde, non obstant leur descort;
Mais de Pallas me doint Dieux sovenir,
Car de Juno n'ay je nul reconfort.