

# ***The Feminist Philosophy in Medieval Literature--- The Case Study of Christine's the Book of the City of the Ladies***

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**Abstract:** This research is designed to make women's voice heard and achieve gender equality. Studying medieval women writings is worthy investigating because it can not only show how medieval men view about the other sex but also appeal for women's rights as much as possible. Besides, gender equality is an important problem that affects every single woman in the world. Therefore, gender studies also need researching. As far as feminist philosophy itself is concerned, the theories of Greek and medieval philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, and St. Thomas Aquinas, will be used for analysing. Finally, there will be a conclusion that concludes all the discussions in this essay.

**Keywords:** medieval literature, philosophy, women writings, religion, gender studies.

## **1. Introduction**

When it comes to philosophy, what is the first thing that occurs to our minds? Is Aristotle's philosophy, Plato's *The Republic* or *The City of God* written by St. Augustine? Each of these philosophers dealt with philosophical problems at their own times. The definitions of philosophy vary from person to person. For example, according to *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell [1] regarded philosophy as an 'intermediate course between theology and science' because it dealt with religion problems and could be speculated by scientifical process.

However, different times create different philosophical issues. For instance, in the Middle Ages, philosophy was always related to religion, feminist ideas and gender problems. In the book, the discussions of the two sexes can be regarded as a way of showing gender equality theories. Warth and Koparanova [2] explained the definition of gender equality: 'Gender equality is understood to mean that the "rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male and female.'

In short, gender equality is to give more rights to individuals regardless of their sexual difference. [3] However, in the medieval period, there was no concept of gender equality in the medieval period. Thus, Pizan's works mainly discussed the unfair treatments on women. It will be specifically discussed in the later sections.

'As a matter of fact, most Christians learned the religious stories through biblical stories. [4]'

The Middle Ages, namely medieval, was a period that existed roughly between '5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, dated from 476AD to 1453. The period had experienced the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of Renaissance. [5]

During the period, religion (mainly Catholic) reached its peak. For instance, Coulton [6] said that medieval society was full of religious ideas and the valid church laws were admitted by medieval

state. Thus, there were also many medieval philosophers, such as Anselm of Canterbury, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine. Although many male philosophers emerged, there were few female philosophers at that time. The later sections will focus on one of the famous medieval women writings written by Christian de Pizan, whose book is called *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

‘Christine, who was born in Venice in 1364, discussed the role of women in society in the book.’ [7]

Set in the medieval period, the women at that time had few opportunities to work outside and gained a position in the church because of sexual difference. As her novel described:

“The Middle Ages inherited a tradition of anti-feminism from two different sources: Judaeo-Christian theology and the medical science of classical antiquity” [7]

According to the paragraphed cited, it is clear that religion plays a huge part in shaping medieval culture and creating misogynists. In reality, many churches were built in the Middle Ages because they were used as an intermediate institution for men prayers [8]. Therefore, her aims for writing this book were to refute the men who were anti-feminist and fight for women’s rights.

## 2. Research Question

From Adam and Eve’s discussions of the original sin of women, to religious discussions about which is made of fire or water, and to the newly feminism movements held by western celebrities, the discussions of men and women has never stopped, especially in the Middle Ages. The period was full of superstitions and religious practice because of the Roman Empire and the spread of Christendom. [1]

Therefore, in the medieval period, not only women’s rights were limited, but women were prejudiced or attacked because of their sexual difference. Even though the essay aims to find some medieval women writings written by medieval women philosophers, there were few resources to refer.

Consequently, there is a question. Was it because they were not allowed to be educated that there were few works written by female philosophers in the Middle Ages?

One of the main reasons was that most learned people were priests or clergies, whose occupations were related to religious activities. Thus, women, of course, had limited opportunities to access education because they were marginalized at that time.

Lack of authentic materials makes the research gaps wider. In this essay, there will be one research question to be discussed, which is “How do medieval women writings reflect feminist philosophy?” Part one will discuss the influence of religion on women. Part two is an argumentation on how feminist philosophy is reflected through medieval women writings, in particular Christine’s.

## 3. Literature Review

In reviews of some works written by medieval philosophers, it is not hard to find that most philosophical theories were related to the society they lived in. In the Middle Ages, there were famous philosophers, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, John the Scot and so on. The former two were mainly the followers of Aristotle because they established their theories by using Aristotle’s. Kenny [9] argued that most of Aquinas’s books proved ‘the existence of God’. It became a part of Christian theology. Although Aquinas’s books tried to prove that God exists, he didn’t discuss whether God made women sinful.

Besides, medieval logicians also contributed a lot to medieval philosophies. For example, in *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy*, it is said that the formal logic could be used in philosophy. ‘All puppies are dogs; all dogs are animals; so, all puppies are animals’ [9]. According to this logic, can we say ‘all human beings are created by God, all men and all women are generations of Adam and Eve’s. So, God creates Adam and Eve at the same time? If God created the two sexes

at the same time, then why are men and women not equal? Or why are women the original sin rather than men? Unfortunately, these questions were not fully answered by medieval philosophers.

In addition, there is little evidence to prove women's roles in the works of medieval logicians. Moreover, John the Scot, also held views that women were the group who embodied man's sensuous and fallen nature because men did not have sins. [1]. In his arguments, John clearly valued the virtue of men while devaluing women. Thus, women were undoubtedly inferior to men from the medieval period and the hatred bias towards women also arose.

There is no doubt that Aristotle's theories had great impact on Christian moral system and medieval philosophers. In his books, he argued about the 'essence' of God. He believed that God is perfect. In regard of his theory, the unsolved question in his books is: If God is perfect, then why is the creation (women) imperfect? Additionally, Aristotle also proved that everything has reasons and causes. Therefore, the reason why women are sinful is that God makes them sinful (cause).

After reading Aristotle's *Ethics* theories, it is not difficult to find that the descriptions about women had more bias and the exclusions of women also made them inferior to men in Greece. Similarly, the justice of Plato's *The Republic* made the women of medieval injustice. In addition, Kenny's comments also show that Greece may have a clear gender division of labour.

'The thirteenth century was the apogee of the Christian Middle Ages. The great projects of Christendom in the twelfth century had been military ventures: The Crusades.' [9]

During this period, Roman Empire played a huge role in influencing every Christian. Thus, churches, without any doubts, had important functions at that time. It (churches) not only served as an intermediate institution which allowed prayers to pray and communicate with God but made privileged clergies earn money from it.

On the contrary, the period had more restrictions on women because of Christian doctrines and superstitions. However, although women were not allowed to go to church except for confessions, there were still few discussions about the reasons in medieval writings.

Christine de Pizan (ca.1365-ca.1429), as one of famous women writers in the Middle Ages. [10] Her book, *The Book of the Cities of the Ladies*, mainly discussed the two sexes from every perspective and rebutted the opinions against women. [7] In the book, she listed the women who had made great contributions to their countries and societies. For example, there was a description regarding women in her book: '...states that the female body is inherited flawed and defective in many of its functions.' [7].

It is clear that the opinions against women are relevant with religion in some way. Religion is used as a way of attacking the other sex. Despite the fact that Christine fought for women's rights and made women acceptable in the Middle Ages, her book certainly had some limitations and gaps. For example, the discussions between men and women were vague because it did not prove how men was superior to women through education and religion. (it will be explained in the Part 3)

In addition, Beauvoir [11] also argued that women were looked down upon by men because their participation in history were too little to remember. Furthermore, other resources related to the discussions were Brown's [12] *Aristotle on the choice of lives: two concepts of self-sufficiency* and the *gender equality* of Elsebet et al. [13]

After reviewing these philosophical issues written by medieval and Greek philosophers, it is probable that the societies they lived influenced them. However, the philosophical debates of the two sexes may not end as long as prejudice towards women still exists.

In the later sections, it will specifically discuss how medieval writings reflect feminist philosophy regarding Christine's *The Book of the Cities of the Ladies*.

#### **4. Research Methods**

This essay will use Aristotle's Ethics and St. Thomas Aquinas's theology theory to discuss the relationships of religion and women. Regarding my research problem, the collections of philosophy books will be needed. Aristotle's *Ethics* examines how women are inferior to men and Plato's *The Republic* argues about the division of labour that makes women's duties distinguish from that of men.

While researching, it is difficult to find the expressions of sexual difference in other medieval women writings. The essay will also focus on the reasons why women are marginalized, including economic factor and education factor. The only way to do my medieval research is to review literature as much as possible because there are few chances of interviewing medieval women writers or medieval philosophers. Reviewing medieval philosophies and history will help to understand medieval culture better.

#### **5. Research Study and Analysis**

##### **5.1. The Relationships between Religion and Women**

###### **5.1.1. The Original Sin of Women**

"Later, Eve was deceived by Satan speaking through a serpent of fruit and ate the fruit. She then took the fruit to Adam and he ate it knowing he was doing wrong thing. Because they disobeyed what God had explicitly told them and chose to believe Satan. Adam and Eve sinned by placing their desires above what God had told them and through this act sin entered the world." [14]

The story of Adam and Eve exists in Judeo-Christian and Islamic theories. It describes how human beings come into the world. For instance, in the Bible, the reason why Adam and Eve fallen into the world was that Eve allured Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Therefore, women, without any doubts, were sinful throughout all religion doctrines and became the Original Sin.

Fortin [15] explained the definition of Original Sin in his *Book Review of Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*. He stated that Original Sin was an answer to baptism. It is true that religious practice is related to human behaviours, which means that God will treat good man (baptized people) and bad man (unbaptized people) differently.

In addition, in *The City of God*, St. Augustine also believed that those who were pure and baptized by God could live in the city of God and enjoyed happiness in the Heaven. On the contrary, the unbaptized people would suffer the burn and be damned in the Hell. [9] Thus, to live in the 'city' of God, people went to church regularly to wash out their 'sins' inherited from Adam and Eve and to prove their loyalties to God. It is possible that women were forbidden to go to church because they had original sins. And it might make the churches of medieval unholy and make God displeased.

However, in philosophy, women are inferior to men because they are made of water. For example, Greek thinkers (Aristotle, Galen etc.) thought that there were four elements (earth, fire, water, and air) to form the world. Besides, man is made of fire (heat and dry) while women is made of water (coldness and moisture). In the medieval, people believed that fire was superior to water because it was the primary instrument of nature. [7] Thus, women, unsurprisingly, was inferior to men from philosophy perspective.

###### **5.1.2. Pizan's Views on Religion and Women**

Christine de Pizan discussed the relationship between religion and women in her *The Book of the City of the Ladies*. For instance,

'I came to the conclusion that God had surely created a vile thing when He created women.' [7]

‘to encourage men generally to avoid leading a lustful and sinful existence. They therefore attacked all women in order to persuade men to regard the entire sex as an abomination.’ [7]

Clearly, in the book, it is said that women were hated by men because they (men) regarded women as an unholy creature which might bring men sins. There is no doubt that the Roman Empire played an important role in shaping Christianity. As mentioned before, in the Middle Ages, the superstitions reached its peak because of the spread of Christendom and influences of Roman churches. Thus, people believed that women were sinful because it was God’s will.

Finally, people in the medieval went to church every day and prayed five times a day because they thought that ‘the good things in life were due to the bounty of God and that the evil events of the times were due to their sins’. [16] Therefore, one of the reasons why women were limited in the church was that men tried to keep sins (women) out of the church.

## 5.2. The Feminist Philosophy in Medieval Women Writings

### 5.2.1. Philosophy and Women

In philosophy, there are some discussions regarding soul and body. For example, Greek philosopher Socrates once argued that the soul and the body of human beings are separated, which means that some behaviours acted by human are their souls’ intentions rather than their bodies. [1] Therefore, here is a question: How can we tell whether the person is ‘men’ or ‘women’ from their souls? If a male soul lives in a female’s body or a female soul lives in a male’s body, then which gender should they belong to?

According to the philosophical questions, it is necessary to discuss gender equality in Pizan’s. For Pizan, the aims of writing *the Book of the Cities of the Ladies* are to show that women’s souls as well as men’s should be equally treated in the Middle Ages. Thus, it is likely that these misogynists hated the other sex’s souls rather than their bodies (or female appearance).

### 5.2.2. Aristotle’s Ethics on Women and the Justice of Plato’s The Republic

It cannot be denied that Greek philosophy had influenced medieval philosophers and logicians, especially for Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Aristotle was a famous Greek philosopher, whose works and theories were used by many followers. In his *Ethics*, he discussed about the ethics of relationships. For example, he believed that the superior needs to be loved by the inferior rather than the superior loves the inferior. Moreover, Aristotle also regarded wives and children as subjects of men because ‘the man rules in accordance with his worth, and in those matters in which a man should rule, but the matters that befit a woman he hands over to her’. [1]

Concerning Aristotle’s life experience, it is clear that the society he lived in (Greece) hold a regulation that all citizens except for women and slaves could take part in democracy (the democracy are not the same concept with today’s democracy), which means that only men had rights of devoting and being a member of governments.

According to these, there is no doubt that Aristotle’s theories made women lower than men. Some medieval philosophers, undoubtedly, also used his theories and added it into the Christine Bible. As a result, that is the reason why men looked down upon women and excluded them from religious practice in the Middles Ages.

Last but not least, Plato’s theory can also be used as another tool that analyses the relationships between male and female. In *The Republic*, Plato believed that justice was what everyone needs because it was ‘the health of the soul’. [9] Indeed, in the religious medieval, people sought justice in the church in order to make them healthier.

However, the question is that justice is only in the hand of the people who have powers in the state or governments, for example, men and aristocracy. There are two reasons that make women of the

Middle Ages injustice. At first, medieval women, excluded by the main society, could not have justice because they did not have powers in governments. Secondly, the rules for women were also injustice. Plato said that justice could be regarded as a division of labour which suited everyone most. [9]

At that time, the duties of women were to stay at home, to look after their babies and to serve their husbands while the obligations of the men should be wage-earners and pioneers in their own fields. So, does it mean that it limits women's rights of becoming money-makers and working outside? In general, the justice was 'injustice' for women in the medieval because the division of labour between the two sexes made women of the Middle Ages lose chances of becoming great and feeding themselves.

As a result, this is what Pizan's book appeal for. She, as a medieval woman, may also suffer from attacks and prejudice from men. The discussions of the two sexes are to make the women of medieval earn justice.

### 5.2.3. The Feminist Philosophy in Christine's the Book of the Cities of the Ladies

Feminist philosophy, as Sjostedt described, is a way of attracting people who are not feminist philosophers to win over more chances for women and show that some jobs should not be gendered. [17]

As far as Pizan's works is concerned, there is no doubt that the women created in her book are representatives of feminists. In her book, she lists the women that are all virtuous and argues about women's good behaviours in order to improve gender equality. One of examples as following:

'in stories of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and even in lives of the saints. If you look at such texts, what you will find instead are countless instances of women who were endowed by God with extraordinary constancy and virtue.' [7]

Pizan's religious examples proved that women were not what those male writers wrote. By using this way, she rebutted the people who were against the female sex. Apart from religion reasons, there are two reasons that contribute to the critique of women.

One reason is that women have a lower economic status than men. For example, a research showed that 38% of women took part in economic activities and women only took up no more than 10% in finances. [18]

In regard of this, what can we know from the data? The answer is that women have little money to support themselves and women must be dependent on men at the present times. Date back to the Middle Ages, women could not make money outside because there were few job opportunities available for them.

It is interesting to mention the priests of medieval because most medieval men whose occupations were priests, popes and even monks made money through churches. Thus, medieval women, who were excluded by ecclesiastical activities, had no chances of earning money from religious venues.

On the other hand, education is also another important factor that makes women despised in men's eyes. Basanez [18] mentioned women's education in the *book Gender Equality and Democracy: A Comparative Perspective*. The author pointed out that women's illiterate rate is two times bigger than men nowadays, which means that nearly half of the female sex cannot either read or write. Therefore, it is not hard to guess that women in the Middle Ages may have larger illiterate rate than today because they were not allowed to access to education. Consequently, feminist philosophy can be seen as a means of showing women's values to make them independent and access to education as much as possible.

'human superiority or inferiority is not determined by sexual difference but by the degree to which one has perfected one's nature and morals.' [7]

However, there are also some limitations in Christine's book. Although she described the good virtues and moralities of women, Christine failed to criticize males' privileges beyond the discussion

of morality and virtue. For instance, Christine did not argue how the men of medieval had impacted on the other sex (e.g., male chauvinism) and how the roles of medieval men and women are divided in medieval marriages. The duty of baby-sitting not only make women have more burdens but make them reduce chances of socializing with others.

Additionally, in the modern feminism movement (the first-wave feminism movement, 1880), Conger [19] believed that women deserved more rights because they did not want to be marginalized and wished to work outside. There are two reasons regarding the marginalization of women.

Firstly, women did not have rights of holding property because they ‘possessed no property rights and economic autonomy [19]. Secondly, there were no laws to allow women access to education because women’s abilities were underestimated.

Hence, it is known that there were gender discriminations in the context of medieval period from Christine’s works. The reason of it was probably due to the division of labour between men and women. In tradition, women’s roles were to stay at home and do some chores while men were the money-earners. Unfortunately, Pizan did not discuss these (women’s roles and men’s duties) in her book. The gender studies in the Middle Ages are also not clearly discussed in her book. Thus, the reasons why women are marginalized in the Middle Ages still have no answers in the feminist philosophy of Christine’s.

#### **5.2.4. Medieval Feminist Philosophy and Modern Politics**

As far as modern politics is concerned, it is not hard to demonstrate that medieval feminist philosophy might have impacted on modern politics. With the rise of women movements, more and more women tend to participate in politics, such as election campaigns. For example, Nizamani [20] stated that few women had participated in elections because they were ‘entirely politically excluded.’ In her *Women in politics*, she listed the number of women who reserved seats as candidates as following:

‘The 2013 elections, during which 419 candidates ran on general seats, shows a growing trend of women contesting general seats. The PPP brought the highest number of directly women to the National Assembly and the Sindh Assembly. Pakistan has 17 per cent women’s reserved seats, whereas Nepal is in the lead with 33pc in its constitutional assembly, followed by Afghanistan with 27pc in its parliament. India has 33pc female representation at the panchayat level.’ [20]

The numbers shown above indicate that women may reserve more seats than before, but not as many as men. According to this, the participation of modern politics is influenced by medieval philosophy and doctrine, which means that women were not allowed to participate in any political activities. However, with medieval feminist philosophy appearing, some women, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen, were influenced by it and they encouraged women to gain their rights and oppose the people who attacked the female sex. Thus, nowadays, more and more women are gradually getting into election campaigns to reserve more seats in Congress and the Senate.

### **6. Conclusion**

The first part of this essay examines how religion influenced women from the original story of Adam and Eve. The discussions of original sin of women above also make it clear that women were regarded as an unholy creature in the Middle Ages. That was the reason why women’s social status was lower than men. Thus, the marginalization of medieval women also made them keep away from governments, politics and ecclesiastical activities related to churches.

Another part of the essay shows how feminist philosophy is reflected through medieval women writings. The theories of Aristotle, Plato and medieval philosophers can also make people understand gender equality and the medieval religion better. Furthermore, the Christine’s feminist philosophies prove that women’s virtues and morality are the same as men in the Middles Ages because both sexes

are created by God. Besides, the limitation of Christine's works also prove that medieval women writings have not fully addressed gender studies because some laws are not established. The roles of medieval men and women in medieval marriages are scarcely discussed. And the two reasons of marginalization of women show that women have longed to gain more rights since the first feminism movement. Christine's feminist philosophy also needs researching in detail in the later study. The women's participation of modern politics is also closely related to medieval feminist philosophy. It not only increases the conscious of gaining more rights from the male sex, but shows that women also have abilities to participate in politics.

Lastly, although this essay has discussed some philosophical opinions on women, it still leaves more feminist questions to be solved in the near future. Hopefully, there should be more discussions of the two sexes in women writings and more attention should be paid to the debates of gender studies in female's works as well.

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