

**DEBATING THE LOVE DEBATE: GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT V.
CHRISTINE DE PIZAN***

[Christine is at a writing desk in a sunny study, surrounded by books. She is obviously hard at work, though clearly enjoying her labors. Guillaume enters the room but she notices nothing and does not return his direct glance and half bow. Amused, he turns with a wry smile to address those present.]

Guillaume: [To the audience.] You are kind, sweet friends, to attend us. And I hope, gracious lords and ladies, that you will be judges of what will soon come to pass here. I wish to appear before you as a complainant, though the injury I presume to suffer is hardly real. The year, as well you know, is that of our lord, 1407. Nearly three decades have now passed since I departed the world whose affairs and business, which grow more unpleasant as the last of God's plan unfolds, still trouble this worthy lady here. Those thirty years, that speck of eternity, has, as you might suppose, brought much that bears recording in verse. Poetry once flowed so easily through my mind though the pen was often too slow or dull to fix the words on the page.

No longer, however, do I feel the need to advance myself by pleasing those of higher station, or by offering something to inspire those who can change words into deeds. This latter is a task I twice attempted for princes whose élan and wit piqued my fancy; yet—an interesting point this—it seems to suit better this living writer, who can out-clerk clerks, even out-man men when it suits her. Descended I have from the blessed light and sublime music, for another purpose. In brief, I'll give my beautiful sister here much to think about, pretending that she's given offense. It's all a game, of course, but is life so unlike the amusements we design, the dramas in which we cast ourselves? Sometimes experience apes a poet's fable, as well I know. The letters of fair Peronelle, that sweet surprise, seduced me once. And, creaking in a dry old age, beset by gouty limbs, I took the woman's part in this amour turned upside down. I, the writer of good fame, pretended to get down on my knees to a bit of scribbled verse. And, let's be honest, that was at best a passable attempt at song by the slip of a girl, however much a coquette she was. Playing the woman—in my own verse, of course—was by no means disagreeable and seemed to please Peronelle more than a little. Yet she broke my heart, despite the happy end I gave the tale. Who would, after all, want to read of something that came to nothing?

By St. Eloi, it wounded the man (yet again, a woman doing me wrong, eager to take but not to give). But the writer in me played the game for the sheer pleasure of word play (could I have designed it better if I'd invented the girl?), and at the end I had another text for noble offering, one that lays bare my weakness with an enviable virtuosity, if I do say so myself. And yet today, life will mirror poetry as

I direct it to. Years ago, I thought the way to turn one judgment, beloved by many, into two was to put on my stage an angry reader, whose desire to see me corrected might prompt a friendly altercation. The point, of course, was to create the matter for yet another poem. And there in textual jest I submitted to a writer's penance, making the work a gift while reaping further renown from my triumphant humiliation.

Today, I'll play this same trick on my esteemed sister of the quill. She's read my works—I'm flattered, naturally—and has done with them as I did with others—which is to say, she took what she needed, letting go the rest. Once my two debates in particular held interest for her—unless she wrote the three others simply to share my fame, but then she's too honest and principled to lie so completely. And yet now from my book and from pure love, its most especial theme, she has long since turned. She's been busying herself by challenging the ill repute of ladies, a theme that provoked, if only in written form, a heavenly embassy full of admonition and good sense. She's thus quite accustomed, I think, to seeing spirits such as those beautiful ladies who came to her as she wrote and will not take flight when I choose to reveal myself to her.

Guillaume: Madam. [Christine takes no notice.] [A little louder.] Madam! [Christine still takes no notice. Even louder.] Madam, do you scorn my greeting or are you so busied by what you write you do not see the man who stands before you?

Christine: [Startled.] Pardon me, fair sir, but so deep am I in my own thoughts I did not notice you. Please, good friend, I beg you to forgive me. I meant no disrespect, for I am busy with a task that gives and bestows honor. Perhaps you will understand how one can be so preoccupied that disrespect is the result. The Latin text before me, I find, is often difficult to construe, with its strange terms, and the matter therein, mainly the art of war, is still a stranger to me.

Guillaume: That boon's an easy one to grant since I see, it's obvious, that you've no malice toward me. I forgive your rudeness, unintentional as it was.

Christine: I thank you for it. I thought the house was empty and expected to hear no one until my good mother calls me to supper. Yet you are not the first such visitor I've had. The light in which you stand shows you are no earthly man, but a blessed spirit. Do you, resembling those three others lately come here, give material shape to one of those great forces that move us, Reason and Justice chief among them? Have you come as a human to announce that I am once more to become a man, the better to bring my ship to safe harbor? Have the heavens further instruction to impart or perhaps some other commission I am to fulfill? I'm occupied as it is with a pressing matter—helping the men among us the better to wage war, a skill in which they've much need to improve.

Guillaume: No grand messenger I, my lady, but a person and a man, or once was. And known to you as well, though you never saw my face, nor I yours. In my book we met, and there on the pages whose disposition I arranged you found inspiration for one of the voices you have made your own, and with no small talent. You do not recognize me? My book is there before you, and here's the man who wrote what you did read.

Christine: Please, sir, again I mean no offense, but as you see I've a desk full of texts. Some are the books that others wrote, with difficulty obtained, and some the books I've penned myself, with no small pain and sometimes, to tell the truth, on themes that did not move my soul. There's more to life and art than love, though men seem to think love is all. I have myself, with half a heart, danced this dance (one that is for women sometimes old and tiresome) in order to advance myself. Poetry has merit as a form since it pleases like a song, but careful thought demands a prose expression to suit its twists and turns. With this in mind, I've read and made my own the work of many men, including this long-dead Roman, who'd be surprised, I wager, to learn a woman now finds another voice for him to speak what he knows of arms and battle.

But what is your identity? I know you cannot be the sour Matheolus, he who scorns women, may God blight his soul. Your face, though dimly lit, I find familiar, even if not from life, it's true. I've seen it in on parchment, honoring the august powers who prompted the words you came to speak. You are William, the clerkly poet of Rheims, born in Machaut, if I don't miss my guess. A master of rhetoric and music both, much celebrated, and rewarded too, by the grand seigneurs you amused. I am honored by your visit here, fair sir, for you marked out for me a path to take as I sought to learn the craft you'd taught yourself. And once I traveled that path in profit, though now no more. You wrote of how men and women suffer different fates in love. It was a theme well ornamented by a debate into which, the second time at least, you pretended as a poet to be forced. In good humor, you supported your case with bad examples as you defamed, but gently, the gentler sex. All the while—an author pulling puppet strings—you made jest of the clerkly failings of your poetic self, and mocked the mocking too, punishing your sin against the purity of love by having your high-born judges charge you to write more and better verse. Poets that misspeak their commissioning might better find themselves banished from quills and ink—this fate your other self deserved and more. But you of course deftly backed both sides, making verse that was your penance even as it displayed again the crime needful of correction. No small achievement, this.

Guillaume: [With an ironic smile] Madam, I thank you for these words of high praise. But this admiration, perhaps a little grudging, bears upon my mission here, which is to confront you with your discourtesy. [His manner grows

sterner.] When you were a novice at versifying poems that might please a court, you presumed to extend the life of works by challenging the royal judgments they contained. No fault lies in glossing another poet's work, but you showed me no respect when you presumed to re-judge what I had said, implying that it needed some correction beyond what my wit and noble mentors, those in the text and living at the court as well, had already well supplied me.

Christine: [Amused by his manner, but not fooled.] Fair sir and noble rhetorician, I meant no disrespect, only honor to your still enviable renown. If I changed what I found in your book, why, that's a woman's privilege. From what I've read of your poetry, you seem to believe that women are ever changeable, no more stable than a weathercock blown restlessly by every passing breeze, if I may quote you more or less. Would you have us women always the same? Should we be slaves to your wit? Must we be not only what men's words say we are, but forced—indignity of indignities—to repeat them as our own as well?

Guillaume: [Unmoved by the obvious ploy.] The respect owed to those who came before, the authorities to whom we lend a fresher voice, makes slaves of no one, as well you know. The burden of translation, properly borne, confers dignity, not shame. God wills us to pass on the wisdom that we find in the texts of our old masters, for the benefit of all true hearts. But, hold a moment, we should not begin our pleading before the court is properly complete. These fair lords and ladies here assembled—and of this I'm certain—will do us the honor of constituting a proper court. And so they will know how to answer, I've given them highborn roles to play. And thus they shall come to represent, as that other Guillaume has it in the poem called the *Rose*, the parts and qualities we all share because our souls and faculties obey the laws of nature. This is a method you would have done well to follow. But no matter. The remedy is near enough. [Guillaume hands out large cards on which are written the following five words: Reason, Modesty, Temperance, Youth, and Loyalty]. Five judges will we have, as suits a case in which a moral question is concerned. They will determine, as their natures move them, which of us is in the right.

Christine: Of the judges we'll speak again presently. But let us first hear what you find offensive in the judgment works I've written. To my knowledge, they've amused both the lords and ladies who have read them or heard them read aloud. What fault, gentle and most honored reader, do you find with them?

Guillaume: It would better honor you, I think, that I begin with words of praise. For in your works, there is much to recommend. The great matter of love, which marks out the poem's shape and offers the poet a pleasing mask to wear, is the theme that gives substance to your judgments, as it should. For what would those at court find pleasing if wine should argue with water, or summer with

winter, or if birds of different kinds should dispute their several virtues—these are schoolmen's themes and find no favor with the author moved by his very nature to compose. I read these works and other thinner stuff, and I thought the debate—no simple dreamscape story, but a game to tease and please the mind—could well be turned to love, a part of life, as well I know, that puts more questions than it answers. And, fair lady, you saw the merits in my choice and honored me by lending this form a new and fresher voice when mine, as God and Nature so arranged, had nothing more to say. And you've taken my point as well, that love's questions engage the noble lady as much as the gentleman who suffers first its pangs. In the tale of Poissy, you demonstrate this better than I dared, when the suffering lady shows that the female eye knows well how to appraise the virtues of a man, the form of his body most of all. That men and women are the same in this was my thought—and you have, to my taste, followed that thought well in what you had your lady speak.

Of love you made yourself the poet too, and it was right a woman should perform this service since her heart knows love as well as that of any man. Peronelle could write a pretty song, and was bold enough to confess a love when she felt it, and just as did you, she learned from my example, took the forms a man had written and wrote them anew for a gentler voice. So loyal you seem to Love, our deity, in most of what you say that I am shamed by your fault, which, surrounded by such virtue, is given place in those works as well. In your poem of the lovers two, you have the questions and debate be spoken by two men, who differ in the joys and pains they have found in the game of love. You do not use my plan; there is no woman therein who measures her pain and joy against a man's. Ladies hear the altercation and are asked to judge it—no problem here, for ladies can judge well what they themselves feel, too. Yet one of these ladies speaks, and in speaking gives voice to thoughts that offer deep offense to Love, and dishonor his servants, and I first among them, whose path you chose to follow so closely otherwise.

This lady to whom you give voice, of noble and gentle birth, does not rebuke the knight and squire for claiming that men suffer more in love than women do—which is the theme, as you know, to which I would give pride of place. Instead, she argues, against the witness of every text, that no man in fact suffers as the books say they do; that men tell such tales to women knowing it isn't true, so as to gain their mercy and their confidence. She dares to state that talk of love is merely rigolage, a foolishness unworthy of the honor that poets pay it. The books of love all lie, your woman judge says, but then she speaks of Reason and that goddess's rude denunciation of love and lovers in the Rose; even the greatest joy of love, says your lady, is something that's worth little and passes quickly. Indeed, she is so presumptuous, the haughty wag, that she denies even Reason's

argument that love imperils those who come too close. And what sort of lady is this woman? Why she's someone who thinks that everyone loves money most of all, and the comfort that they can find in living. Hardly a grande dame in my view, more of a bourgeoisie perhaps. And so, fair adversary, what say you to these charges: that you offend against the dignity of Love, warn off his eager servants, make light of the pains in which so many find their greatest pleasure, contesting the seriousness of the very matter that you seem to make the center of your work?

Christine: Good master, in truth, you waste my time and detain me from more serious pursuits. Do you not know that civil war is imminent? Outside these walls "la douce France" falters under the blows of the accursed English, its head a raging storm of insanity in the person of the king, its heart putrid with the maggots of immorality, its limbs weakened by the cowardice of those lords who should risk all in their protection of the country. And what cure can this feeble patient find? Alas, nothing better than the bloodletting of the Burgundians and Armagnacs, who slit each others' throats with impunity. The prophecies foretell a maid of Orleans who will staunch the flow, unhorse the wicked enemy and set free the captive country. May God grant that I live long enough to sing the glory of this simple girl! You, while such calamity prevails, do nothing but prattle on about that other girl, the lady I created to speak sense in the midst of folly! Would that beam of light that penetrates my window could whisk you back to the Elysian fields or, perhaps, to those warmer climes reserved for men who abuse the gifts that God and Nature gave them.

But stay! My anger does not become the scholar or the woman. The respect a pupil owes her teacher obliges me to answer to your accusations. Let me show you, point for point, where you mistake the case. Or do you, my lord, wish to restate your contention before I lay out my argument?

Guillaume: [With some irony.] No, my lady! Just as gold surpasses silver, as the sun outshines the moon, so the torrent of your wisdom dwarfs the trickle of my words.

Christine: Well then, dear master, since the courtesy that made you a poet to please princes would indulge me yet again, let me show you how your devotion to the God of Love, that purveyor of fresh rosebuds, has obscured the light of your keen wit. You call love a "great master." You say it is the center of my work. But in your own debates you treat it lightly, never hesitating to overturn a verdict honorably rendered when there is profit to be had in changing sides. In treating it thus, you are as fickle as Aeneas, deserting Dido on her shores; as willful as callow Jason, who abandoned Medea when his heart found haven elsewhere. It seems to me that when you call woman's nature changeable, you men hide happily behind a veil of smoke that is blown clean away by the bracing winds of truth.

Moreover, if you see love at the heart of my debate poems, you stand like a man too well hidden in the thicket to see the forest for the brush. What, then, lies at the center of my debate of the two lovers? Why, that very lady you make much of, sir, the very one who doubts that love can truly blind if one has eyes to see. Let Theseus be your guide. Look closely and perceive Ariadne's thread, let it direct you through labyrinths of folly until you reach the loftier perspective that puts love in its place. Perhaps the little dog who so adroitly pulled your robe can lead you there apace. And if you ask why my debate of the two lovers does not have a lady speak more seriously on the subject, the answer is easily told. Minerva had no time for it, nor Ceres, nor Isis. Like all the other inhabitants of our glorious City, she left the trifles of life to men and built instead a proper edifice of stone and truth that will not budge.

That you accuse me, sir, of falsely reversing the verdict in your paltry cases brings me mirth rather than pain or fear. You, the champion of changing sides, cannot reproach me for the same! Now I have done. We can put this question in the hands of those you have named judges, if you wish, although it seems an empty exercise to me. Only infants squall and fight and brawl over an inconsequential, shiny bauble. If we must have judges, I wish that Dames Rectitude and Justice were among their number. But Reason will prevail. I beg of her to hear my case and weigh the gravity of your charge to good effect. And what's more, good friend, since charity and goodness were the commandments of the Christ to whose name my own adds but an "ine-y" syllable, I submit to your gamesmanship and pray that Mary, pure Virgin queen who rules over us all with compassion, find some corner in the shadow of the City of Ladies, well outside the walls of course, in which to shelter misguided but goodhearted *auctores* like yourself. In our field of letters, there was once, I heard tell, a cemetery for those poor lovers who died of broken hearts, but the ladies tell me that it remains quite empty; there is nothing there but hot breezes that blow about some dried-up, faded rose buds. I end my speeches here, good master. To say more would be unseemly. I will submit to the judging, if it still pleases you.

Guillaume: These are a woman's arguments, there is no doubt. It is the vice or virtue of your sex—which, I cannot say—to resist what a man and the god who moves him would ask of her. Such good reason is an overrated impulse, I do think. Men know this for a truth: that a woman's no, if she is gentle and debonair, always promises a yes. Resistance melts sweetly when desire's fire is stoked. We let you have your refusal, your fears and doubts—we would not honor you if you consented at the start. But I have every confidence in the judgment of the gracious company here assembled.

Christine: How like a man to think that his is the only truth! I do not condemn Love, only the self-indulgent who abuse it by exaggerating its effects

unscrupulously in order to gain favor. It is a sin against no one to speak the truth—Love is not what men often say it is, and so to call attention to their falsehoods is no disgrace. I expect the judgment in my favor, and defer with confidence to the judges.

Guillaume: Your expectation of success is too bold a claim, for you set yourself against the wisdom of all that has been written, from Ovid to those poets who more recently claim our respect. Can they all be wrong that love is pain and joy, commingled so as to make the bitter that much sweeter and to temper the sweet with a bitterness that pleases? Surely you have done wrong to ridicule the trials that Love so graciously causes his servants to endure—for they grow through the suffering that purifies and strengthens the desire they feel. It is blasphemy to say otherwise. These honored judges will have no wish to perpetuate such disrespect and untruth. Once they have rendered their decision, it should be your penance to compose a poem, not a treatise in long-sentenced prose, that treats the joys and triumphs of what men do feel in love. If ladies are to have their city, why, let men have at least a small edifice of parchment in which they are honored for the virtue they show when Love sets their hearts in motion with a painless wound.

Christine: [In a dismissive tone.] Even were I wrong, what need have men of a woman to defend them in this matter? They make the case themselves quite often enough, and frequently at greater length than the topic warrants. Should your high court find me in the wrong, so be it. But remember: a judgment is worth no more than the wisdom of the judges and however eloquent the arguments, a mock trial (much like protestations of love, in truth!) is still no more than a charade. So stay to hear the outcome if you must, dear friend, but then go back to your place among the honored dead. I have work to do: there's more Latin here to translate into language that our men can understand.

Guillaume: [With a knowing shrug.] I say farewell, then, sweet lady, but give a thought to the virtues we men possess and the pain you ladies inflict on us. That's all that I would ask.

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* An earlier version of this debate was staged at the 34th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, May 1999. After much erudite discussion, the somewhat grudging consensus of the honorable judges chosen from the audience was in favor of Christine.