"Je, Christine"

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If nothing else, Christine de Pizan, fifteenth century poet and writer, is significant for being celebrated both while alive and for years after her death. Though Pizan’s popularity as a feminist writer often overshadows her work as a French nationalist and political influencer, Pizan’s last known piece of literature, *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc*, has been recognized by critics as both a feminist celebration and a biting political criticism. *Ditié*’s claim to expressly feminine power marks a change in Pizan’s habit of drawing on androgynous narrators as a source of authority. *Ditié* is a direct, autobiographical call to action for the citizens of Paris during a pivotal moment in French history: Joan of Arc’s reclamation of France from Anglo-Burgundian forces. The three facets of Christine de Pizan’s poem (its feminist support of a woman warrior, its political critique of newly-crowned King Charles, and its nationalistic appeal to French citizens) do not contradict each other but rather cooperate in an energetic plea for Parisian citizens to welcome the Armagnac forces of Joan of Arc and Charles VII into the city during the failed September siege of Paris in 1429. Ultimately, *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* is a nationalistic poem; it aims to recover the pride and glory of the French court that was lost when King Henry V of England seized Paris in 1418. To that end, Pizan manipulates the political power of providence and mysticism to weaken the King’s divine right as religious sovereign, she proposes Joan of Arc, a low-class woman, as a powerful, moral superior to the king, and she claims a political power for herself, completely rooted in her feminine identity.

The Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War had been raging in France for twenty-two years when Christine de Pizan wrote *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* in 1429. Rooted in a struggle for regency between the Duke of Orléans and the Duke of Burgundy in the wake of King Charles VI’s apparent madness, the civil war eventually led to a Burgundian alliance with English forces during many of the skirmishes in the Hundred Years War. The French court, represented by Armagnac forces, then, was often fighting England and Burgundy at the same time. During this period, Paris, the largest city in Europe and hub of French art and culture, passed back and forth between Armagnac and Anglo-Burgundian rule, remaining firmly under Anglo-Burgundian control from 1419 to the year Christine de Pizan wrote *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc*. Losing Paris, a symbol of the French court and national identity, was devastating to those loyal to the French monarchy, as were the Pizans.

It is against this historical backdrop that Pizan opens *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* with a lament for the fallen state of France, explaining her sudden disappearance from the French court eleven years earlier: “I, Christine, who have wept for eleven years in a
walled abbey where I have lived ever since Charles . . . fled in haste from Paris” (Ditié I). Even while removed from Charles VII’s court in Bourges, Pizan’s familiarity with the French court and her proximity to Marie of Valois explains her detailed understanding of the politics behind The Hundred Year War and the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War, enabling her to write the politically driven Ditié.

On March 6, 1429, while Pizan wrote Ditié, Joan of Arc, a peasant woman born and raised in Domrémy-la-Pucell and the inspiration for Pizan’s poem, met with the dauphin Charles VII for the first time, claiming to have divine instruction to support Charles VII in recovering France from English domination. Impressed by her, Charles VII gave Joan command of a small armed force, and after Joan led a string of successful campaigns reclaiming Orléans, Loire Valley, and Troyes, the traditional coronation city of Reims welcomed Joan of Arc and Dauphin Charles VII into the city. Charles VII was crowned King of France in the reclaimed Reims on July 17.

Joan of Arc’s visions of Saint Margaret, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, and Archangel Michael became vital details in not only rebranding the French/English conflict as a Holy War but in Christine de Pizan’s characterization of Joan in the Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had seen a growth in mysticism and fortune-telling in the Western church and the French courts; the lines between religious prophecy and fortune-telling blurred as both became accepted sources of religious and political information. Christine de Pizan’s own father, Tommaso de Pizan, practiced judiciary astrology, the art of reading the stars to ascertain the will of God, and Charles VII was known to visit clairvoyants before making political decisions. Though Joan of Arc’s highly religious visions align her more as mystic than fortune-teller—her voices often instructing her what to do but not what would happen as a result—Pizan leans heavily into prophetic tradition when celebrating Joan in her Ditié, going to great lengths to merge the divine authority of a mystic with the political power of a fortune-teller. By including the legendary Merlin the Sibyl with the biblical Esther, Judith and Deborah, Pizan ties prophetic figures independent of Church and monarchy with religious women celebrated by the clergy (Ditié XXXI, XXVIII). In the same way, Pizan claims Joan’s religious power in Ditié is both independent of the monarch and Church while also religiously valid.

Joan’s religious influence is not to be underplayed. “It is a fact well worth remembering,” writes Pizan, “that God should nevertheless have wished . . . to bestow such great blessings on France, through a young virgin” (Ditié XII). By referring to Joan almost exclusively by her self-chosen title “La Pucelle,” or in English, “The Maid,” Pizan emphasizes Joan as both a virgin and a symbolic mother who “feeds France with the sweet, nourishing milk of peace,” recreating her as a type of Mary (XXIV). By referring to Joan as “a simple shepheardess,” though Joan herself insisted she had never been one, Pizan also aligns Joan’s life with Jesus’s messianic trajectory. To some degree, by emphasizing Joan’s religious significance in Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc, Pizan re-enforces the pattern of powerful women depicted as pure vessels for the divine to work through, with no responsibility or credit for their actions. Unlike many mystics who came before her though, Joan is by no means portrayed as ethereally passive. Instead, Pizan emphasizes Joan’s active role in reclaiming France from Anglo-Burgundian forces. With Joan’s direction, France’s recovery becomes a matter of divine intervention, “And know that she will cast down the English for good, for this is God’s will” (XLI). Aside from distinguishing her among mystics, Joan’s active role in Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc also operates as a foil to the hesitation and passivity of Charles VII, the newly crowned King of France. While recalling Charles VII’s coronation in Ditié, Pizan writes
Joan in present tense, “The Maid who strikes you all down,” while she writes Charles VII in both past tense and passive voice, “He was most nobly received and truly anointed” (Ditié XLVIII, XLIX). Noting Pizan’s change in tenses between Charles VII and Joan, one medieval scholar concluded, “Even though the coronation at Reims came after the lifting of the siege of Orleans . . . the agency for present-tense history is Joan.” Joan’s agency re-appears as Pizan complicates the religious concepts of Providence and ordination. Of Charles VII, Pizan writes, “God would never have bestowed such grace upon you if it were not ordained by Him that you should, in the course of time, accomplish and bring to completion some great and solemn task” (Ditié XV). Though Pizan allows Charles some potential glory, it is only because she can find no other explanation for why God would spare him by sending Joan to reclaim France in his name: “what honour for the French crown, this proof of divine intervention!” (XII). Regarding Joan herself: “never did Providence refuse you a request” (XXII). In Pizan’s poem, Joan of Arc acts not only as a servant of God, but by virtue of her Godly foresight combined with action, has power over Providence itself; the king, meanwhile, is acted upon. Pizan writes, “A thing is proved by its effect,” thus Joan of Arc’s success in acting upon God’s divine design to return France to glory, after eleven years of Charles VII’s failure to do the same, undermines the divine right of Charles VII (XXIX). It is Joan, and not the king, who represents the will of God.

When Pizan, as narrator, does praise the monarchy, the praise is directed at the throne as a symbol for France as a whole, not at any one specific ruler. When Pizan urges her readers to “let us greet our King!” it is not Charles VII himself, but “his noble array” that garners celebration (VI). Any praise heaped upon Joan, then, creates a foil—absence of praise that should have been gifted to Charles VII himself. By fixating on Joan’s bravery, physical strength, and intelligence, all masculine-coded traits, Pizan highlights female excellence in male-centric fields as well as dubs Joan a representative of everything Pizan wished from the French monarchy. Since Joan is a representative of God and ideal royalty when Charles VII is not, Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc becomes “about constructing Joan the Maid as both immediately and ultimately more important to France than Charles the king.”

To understand the political necessity of downplaying Charles VII’s role in reconquering France, we have to understand Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc’s appeal to the Parisian populace. Re-capturing Paris in the name of the French monarchy would have been the turning point for the French Armagnacs in the Hundred Years War, and it was key to Pizan’s desire for France to regain her pre-war glory. The loyalty of the Parisian citizens was hugely influential in the various sieges of Paris, since the city’s citizens vastly outnumbered both defensive and offensive armies combined. In battle, Parisian citizens could sway the victory by fighting with or sabotaging the defensive army from within the city walls. The keeper of Paris, then, was often the party that most pleased the Parisian citizens themselves. Knowing this, much of Ditié was directly written for Parisian audiences, begging them to welcome Joan and Charles VII into the city when they inevitably came to reclaim it. Since entering the city in 1418, Henry V of England had granted citizens of Paris privileges beyond even those they had prior to occupation. Charles VII and the Armagnac party that he represented, by contrast, threatened many of those same liberties. Had Pizan’s Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc and other pro-Armagnac propaganda persuaded Parisian audiences to welcome the 8 September 1429 Siege of Paris, the military attack led by Joan of Arc and supported by Charles VII, may have
been successful. Instead, the 10,000 strong Armagnac French failed to take Paris from its 3,000 Anglo-Burgundian forces, largely in part to Parisians citizens who, fearful of Armagnac taxes and legal restrictions, fought the oncoming army; Paris at the time had nearly 100,000 inhabitants.

When Pizan asks for the faith of the Parisians in Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc, “for [the King] will enter Paris, no matter who may grumble about it! – The Maid has given her word that he will,” she does not ask them to put their faith in Charles VII, but in a heaven-sent Joan, thus campaigning for a religious figure whose divine mission transcends Armagnac or Burgundian politics (Ditié LIV). Pizan’s plea is half threat, “If they offer resistance for an hour, or even half an hour, it’s my belief that things will go badly for them,” and half mockery, “Paris, do you think Burgundy will prevent him from entering?” (LIII, LIV). From stanza XIX forward, Charles VII virtually disappears from Ditié, becoming, if anything, one with the “blind people” whom Pizan chastises by saying, “Can’t you detect God’s hand in this? . . . Do you fight against God?” (XLVII). When Pizan makes her scathing remarks against Charles VII, it is, ironically, for his own good that she does so. By critiquing the king, it is not only Joan of Arc that Christine de Pizan puts in the good graces of Paris in Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc but herself as well, further validating her message by siding with the city in a distaste for Charles VII.

And here is where Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc is significant for Christine de Pizan personally: in empowering Joan’s claim to power, Christine de Pizan also empowers herself, both as a woman and as a bearer of an important political message. By influencing politics from the low social status of women, both Pizan and Joan qualify as models of the Boethian Wheel of Fortune, a medieval symbol for the nature of Fate which operates, blindly, the rise and fall of social and financial status. Writing about another work by Pizan, Avision, feminist critic Brown-Grant comments on Pizan’s use of an autobiographical narrator to “make capital out of her lowly social status as a woman in order to propose herself as a Boethian model of moral consolation and ethical instruction for the princely reader.” There is an important distinction between the authority Pizan claims when using her autobiographical self as narrator in Avision and the same autobiographical narrator in Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc, however. By presenting herself as a Boethian model in Avision, Pizan essentially states that her rise to power occurred by luck. In Ditié, by contrast, Pizan writes, “There is no need for [an unjustly attacked] person to feel dismayed by misfortune. See how Fortune, who has harmed many a one, is so inconstant, for God, who opposes all wrong deeds, raises up those in whom hope dwells,” proposing that God’s will overrides fortune (Ditié, IX). Joan, as a peasant girl who finds herself allied to the king, is clearly one such example Pizan presents, but by emphasizing Joan’s divine ordination throughout Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc, Christine de Pizan also implies that God himself intends to empower marginalized people. Pizan, by extension, claims her authority in the Ditié not by luck or despite her feminine identity but directly because of it, embracing her personal investment in Joan’s success as both a political and feminist hero of France.

In the same way Christine de Pizan profits from empowering Joan’s feminine voice, Pizan also claims the same political power of fortune-telling that lends Joan’s mystic visions. One obvious example of this is when Pizan predicts, though wrongly, a successful siege on Paris, “If they offer resistance for an hour, or even half an hour, it’s my belief that things will go badly for them” (Ditié LIII), and that after reconquering France, Joan will become a key player in the crusades; Pizan predicts “She will destroy
the Saracens, by conquering the Holy Land” (XLIII). On a larger scale, however, one medieval scholar, Anne Lutkus, asserts the entirety of Ditié functions as a historical prophecy. The crux of Lutkus’s argument is dependent upon the exact date that Ditié was written, for while the final stanza of the poem includes a date, “this poem was completed by Christine in the above-mentioned year, 1429, on the last day of July” (LXI). There is some evidence to suggest that July 31 is too soon after the king’s coronation on July 17 to reliably be the poem’s origin. Since the poem focuses primarily on the conflict over Paris, and Armagnac troops didn’t arrive at the gates of Paris until July 29—after a two-week long truce with Burgundy where Anglo-Burgundian forces failed to relinquish Paris to Charles as promised—Lutkus questions, “How soon after the coronation at Reims did Joan herself realize that her goal of taking Paris was at odds with Charles’s immediate plans and how soon did her dissent become public knowledge? That answer to the latter question could not possibly be ‘two days.’”

The earliest record we have of Joan expressing dissatisfaction with Charles VII’s hesitation in attacking Paris is an August 22 letter to the Count of Armagnac, reporting that it is her Lord God, not Charles, who commands her to take Paris. It was unlikely, therefore, that Joan or other political figures of the time pressed for an attack on Paris before the end of the two-week truce. This leaves a very short time period in which Christine de Pizan could have heard the news of an attack on Paris, even with her proximity to Marie of Valois, and write the Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc by the last day of July. If this is the case, then dating the poem in the last stanza, when it could have been written anytime up to the Siege of Paris on September 8, allows Pizan the narrator, “like the oracles that she cites, [to] construct herself as knowing what must happen in the future” despite the ‘future’ of the poem being the ‘present’ it was written in. Pizan’s claim to sibylic authority frames the poem about Joan of Arc with references to her own power as a writer; she begins with “Je, Christine” as an invocation of herself as her own muse, and closing with another with the same “very beautiful poem composed by Christine” (Ditié I, LXI).

The implication of Pizan’s claim to power, as a writer, as a woman, and as a political voice, exposes how Pizan’s political ideology and feminism are interdependent. The success of Christine de Pizan’s appeal to the Parisians depends upon her ability to sell Joan as a political and religious substitute for Charles VII, and her endorsement of Joan is dependent upon Joan’s female identity and divine calling—for who would have expected “a little girl of sixteen” to accomplish what she did (XXXV). In a similar way, Christine de Pizan’s own authority as a writer is strengthened by honoring Joan, empowering both women by celebrating the achievements of their sex. When Pizan “focuses less on gender and more on [Joan’s] disenfranchised state,” she presents Joan as a symbol for the “heterogeneous community of Paris,” a role that Pizan also assigns for herself by using the first person plural throughout the seven stanzas she addresses directly to Paris: “we all thank You, Heavenly Lord, who have guided us through the great tempest into peace” (Ditié XX). In many ways Joan becomes a reflection of Pizan herself, and it is clear from the energy of her writing that Joan represents a great deal of hope to Pizan, “for God… raises up those in whom hope dwells” (IX).

If the goal of Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc was specifically to rally Parisian citizens to an Armagnac army, it ultimately failed. The unsuccessful Siege of Paris in 1429 was followed by two more attempts to take Paris in 1432 and 1434, led by Charles VII. It wasn’t until the Treaty of Arras in 1435 that the city opened its gates to the official King of France. By this time, Joan of Arc had been found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake in
Rouen, cutting short Christine de Pizan’s predictions of Joan the Crusader. The fact that Ditié was anthologized by medieval collectors long after its immediate political relevancy passed proves that its value as a work of literature extended beyond its political context. Much like Pizan’s body of work in general, Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc is significant not only for its content and political ambition, but for the fact that it was written at all, and for the claim to feminine power that Pizan makes throughout the poem. Often when writing in the male-dominated field of political commentary, Christine de Pizan’s work adopts an androgynous narrator. When Pizan writes with the “Je, Christine” signature in Ditié, however, “it steps out of its androgynous framework by becoming a female subject of enunciation.” Joan of Arc’s triumphant rise to fame in France allows Pizan an opportunity to express her political ideologies in the same breath that she celebrates Joan as proof of God’s intention of elevating the status of women in fifteenth century France. Perhaps more, though, Joan of Arc frees Christine de Pizan to write, in the last work of literature she ever published, with her own voice.

Madelyn is an English Major at BYU with minors in Creative Writing and Professional Rhetoric. Her interests include the history of oral poetry in the US, radio broadcasting, and terrible adaptations of Sherlock Holmes. She has had poetry/creative non-fiction published in The Normal School, Americana, and past editions of AWE.
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