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Lost in Reception: Christine de Pizan's Voice and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

ABSTRACT:

This paper considers Christine de Pizan's works as an influential part of the early modern horizon of expectations and of its discursive intertextuality generating the interpretative frameworks within which to read the texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. After a brief overview of the existing research on the reception of de Pizan in England from her lifetime up to the 16th century, the role of de Pizan's voice in intertextual and discursive interconnections is investigated with reference to William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The pairs of characters Theseus and Hippolyta as well as Pyramus and Thisbe from Shakespeare's text will be read in light of de Pizan's oeuvre to suggest possible new insights into Shakespeare's comedy and into Peter Quince's play-within-the-play.

KEYWORDS: Christine de Pizan, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, medieval Shakespeare, Pyramus, Thisbe, Theseus, Hippolyta.

1. Introduction

This paper searches for the flow of Christine de Pizan's voice in Shakespeare's work, selecting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a case study. This choice is purposely made outside the group of plays that can be immediately labelled as 'medieval', in light of a broader appreciation of 'medieval

Shakespeare' that refers not only to Shakespeare's representation of the Middle Ages but also his being part of an intertextual context that cannot ignore the so-called medieval classicism or medieval reenactments and reappropriations of certain discourses[1]. The present investigation, in line with some recent research (Malcolmson 2002; Hoche 2003; Long 2012; Johnston 2014), considers de Pizan's works an influential part of the discursive intertextuality that generates the interpretative frameworks within which to read the texts of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The notion of the Middle Ages as "an uncanny but continuous presence in the early modern period both culturally and textually" (Kenel 2013, 11), which emerged in the 1970s[2], has been gaining ground in the last few decades. What is commonly defined as medieval flows into the early modern period, providing important semantic and thematic patterns. Texts are a particularly effective means of cultural transmission and contamination. In early modern England, medieval works circulated both as manuscripts, hunted for and preserved by very different kinds of people, from competent collectors to devotional readers[3], and as printed texts, representing "a high proportion of the books printed in the sixteenth century" (Cooper 2013, 9). This awareness of a cultural tie between the Middle Ages and the early modern period has also been impacting the field of Shakespeare studies, in which medieval influences had often been overlooked in favour of classical ones, an attitude resulting from Jacob Burckhardt's idea of the Renaissance as a new age opposed to its recent past and built on the revival of antiquity, whose medieval mediation is often left unnoticed (see Cooper 2013, 6; Coldiron 2016 [2009], 56-57).

From this continuity perspective, Shakespeare can be seen as a "medieval invention" (2009, 3), to use Perry and Watkins's words, or, as Helen Cooper puts it, "a writer deeply embedded in the Middle Ages, who inherited many of his shaping ideas and assumptions about everything from stagecraft to language from the medieval past" (Cooper 2013, 1). This paper contributes to supporting

[1] As Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray state when introducing the collection *Shakespeare and The Middle Ages*, "Shakespeare medieval plays include those set in the Middle Ages or those drawing directly on medieval sources, criteria that include almost every play" (2009, 9).

[2] See Thompson 1978, Jones 1977.

[3] See Watson 2004.

this idea by tracking the flow of de Pizan's voice into the intertextual and discursive interconnections of early modern English literature. This medieval voice is particularly challenging compared with common perceptions of the differences between the Middle Ages and early modernity. This is not only because de Pizan writes "the first robust defense of women written by a woman", shattering "facile readings of the 'darkness' of the Middle Ages" (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xix), but also because she provides a female contribution to what Walter Ullmann defined as the "medieval foundations of Renaissance humanism" (1977) through her appreciation of Dante and Petrarch and her theoretical arguments on politics, chivalry and military issues.

The aim here is to consider Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* within a cultural context that includes de Pizan's works, following Anne E. B. Coldiron's methodology, which means:

> [looking] beyond source-and-influence, since pervasive medieval content formed a ground or baseline, a medieval 'horizon of expectations' (Jauss 1982), with which, and often against which, Shakespeare and other authors worked. Shakespeare often took an old idea or trope that had been steadily present in the culture in various, medievally mediated forms, and even if not using it as a direct source, seems to have assumed audience knowledge of it that would make his use of it the more pointed. (Coldiron 2013, 57)

After a brief overview of the reception of de Pizan in England from her lifetime up to the 16th century, here used as external evidence of her being part of Shakespeare's cultural context, the characters Theseus and Hippolyta as well as Pyramus and Thisbe from Shakespeare's text will be read in light of de Pizan's oeuvre to suggest possible new insights into Shakespeare's comedy.

2. Christine de Pizan's early reception in England

This section provides an account of Christine de Pizan's incredibly successful reception in England between the 15th and 16th centuries. She was a prolific and pioneering writer who benefited from and contributed to the thriving literary and scholastic culture of humanist Europe. She was born in

Venice and defined herself as *femme ytalienne*[4] throughout her life, even though she moved to Paris, at the court of Charles V, when she was just four years old. She left Italy because her father, Tommaso de Benvenuto da Pizzano, a celebrated lecturer at the University of Bologna, was appointed physician and astrologer by the French king. Charles V was, at that time, committed to the development of knowledge and the arts through his Sapientia Project, which led, among other things, to the construction of the Louvre Library and the commissioning of books[5].

Her career began out of necessity. After the death of Charles V, her father lost support at court and died in 1387. Three years later, her husband Etienne du Castel, secretary to the king, died too, leaving her in a strained financial situation while in charge of her widowed mother, three children and niece. Writing professionally was a means to earn a living for her and her family, a condition she allegorically described as a passage from womanhood to manhood[6]. The topics she wrote about challenge gender stereotypes, as they range from courtly love to chivalry and war. Gender was also an issue in the reception of her works (more on this at the end of this section). Pizan herself, in *Le livre de l'advision Christine* (1402), ascribes her success within literary and aristocratic circles, both in France and elsewhere, to the marvel elicited in readers by her being a woman[7]. The French court offered her the opportunity to be in touch with powerful and aristocratic people. "Her patrons and

[4] She uses this phrase in the prologue of *Le livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie*. When the focus turns to specific versions of de Pizan's books, they will be explicitly referred to either by their French titles or Middle English and Early Modern English titles. Otherwise, modern English titles will be used. The same holds true for quotations.

[5] Within this incredibly flourishing and inspiring cultural milieu, Christine de Pizan was encouraged to study by her father. Her husband likewise supported her bent for erudition; nevertheless, she was well aware of the limits imposed on her education just because of her gender (see Willard 1984).

[6] In *Fortune's Transformation*, she writes: "I felt that my flesh was changed and strengthened, and my voice much lowered, and my body harder and faster [...] I felt that I had become a true man" (de Pizan 1997, 106).

[7] Christine de Pizan states: "[…] since they were benevolent and most compassionate princes, they were pleased to see [my books] and delighted to receive them, more, I think, because it was unusual for a woman to be an author (since that had not happened for a long time) than because of the merit of the texts. And so, in a short span of time, my books came to be discussed in and transported to various places and countries" (2018, 14).

dedicatees", Geri L. Smith points out, "occupied the highest strata of society, and included such luminaries as King Charles VI, Queen Isabeau of Bavaria, John of Berry, Philip the Bold of Burgundy, John the Fearless of Burgundy, and Louis of Orléans" (Smith 2017, 4).

In England, her name was well known throughout her lifetime. On the occasion of the marriage between Richard II and Charles VI's daughter, Isabelle, Christine de Pizan met John Montagu, Earl of Salisbury. He became her patron and, according to some courtly rumours, also her lover (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xiv, 14). In 1398, he invited her son Jean de Castel to travel with him and his son to England and sojourn with him. It has been demonstrated that on this occasion, they took some copies of her works to England. When the Earl, a supporter of Richard II, was executed in 1400, Jean de Castel was first under the care of Henry Bolingbroke, now Henry IV, before going back to France, as his mother astutely declined the invitation from the new king to join her son at the English court[8]. In any case, she sent him copies of her works, and it has now been established that other manuscripts of hers circulated in England during the 15th century (Downes, 2009), to which translations and, later, incunabula should be added.

As early as 1402, Thomas Hoccleve translated her *L'epistre au dieu d'amours* (1399) into English (*The Letter of Cupid*) – with cuts and additions, mainly from Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386), so much so that the work was often attributed to Chaucer, particularly the 15th century editions (Mairey 2016, 495). A good number of de Pizan's works came through John of Bedford, who was regent of France after the death of Charles VI in 1422 and who, three years later, acquired the libraries of both Charles V and Charles VI. Among such precious books was the famous "Book of the Queen" (British Library, Harley MS 4431), which contains a collection of de Pizan's works – including *La Cité des dames* (1405) – produced under the author's supervision for Isabeau of Bavaria, wife of Charles VI, and later owned by Jacquetta of Luxembourg, second wife of John of Bedford, who, soon widowed, married Sir Richard

[8] As she herself revealed: "To make a long story short, I managed, by dint of great effort and my books to obtain permission for my son to come and fetch me to take me to this country I had never seen before. And so I refused to allow that fate to befall me and him, because I could not believe that a traitor might come to a good end" (de Pizan 2018, 15).

Woodville. Her son, Anthony Woodville, inherited the manuscript and translated *Les proverbes moraux* (1400-1401) from it in 1478. He had his translation printed by William Caxton as *The Morale Prouerbes of Cristyne*, making de Pizan "the first woman writer to be printed in England" (Long 2012, 526). The last known owner of the manuscript was Henry Cavendish[9], son of William Cavendish: this means, as posited by Cristina Malcolmson (2002), that the volume was available to Margaret Cavendish too, possibly influencing her proto-feminist works.

The Woodville coterie was central to the spread of de Pizan's works. Bedford's lieutenant, John Fastolf (1380-1459) – famous for being the probable source for Shakespeare's Falstaff – commissioned his stepson, Stephen Scrope, to translate the *Épître d'Othéa à Hector* (1407-1409): *The Epistle of Othea to Hector; or, The Boke of Knyghthode*. This English version, which was published around the 1440s-1450s without the name of the French author, was followed by a second anonymous translation of the same book[10]. Around 1536-1545, Robert Wyer also translated the book into English. This print edition does not mention de Pizan as author and provides a new title to the text, whose popularity in England is also testified to by its influence on authors such as John Lydgate (Schieberle 2020, 8-9). Fastolf's secretary, William Worcester, translated selections from *Le livre de faits d'armes et de chevalerie* (1408-1409) in a manuscript titled *The Boke of Noblesse*. Both Scrope and Worcester cast doubts on de Pizan's authorship and attributed her works to "a company of nameless clerks from the University of Paris" (Summit 2000, 75). Elizabeth Woodville's husband, Edward IV, was interested in French manuscripts and contributed to the enrichment of the royal libraries. He followed in the footsteps of his father, Richard, third Duke of York, who is likely to have been the owner of a manuscript *Cité des dames* (Royal MS. 19 A.XIX), whose author's name does not appear. Elizabeth Woodville's daughter, Elizabeth of York, married Henry VII, who was so interested in Christine de Pizan's work as to ask William Caxton to

[9] After the death of Anthony Woodville in 1483, the manuscript passed to Louis of Bruges and was brought to the Continent, where the duke must have acquired it, either in Paris or the Netherlands (Malcolmson 2002, 24).

[10] It is possible that Lady Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII' s mother, was given Scrope's translation as a gift.

translate and print *The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye* (1489). In 1521, a translation of *Le livre du corps de policie* (1407) was published by John Skot (*The Booke of the Body of Polycye*). In the same year, Henry Pepwell published Brian Anslay's translation of the *Cité des dames* under the auspices of the third Earl of Kent, Ann Woodville's son, Richard Grey. De Pizan's 'female utopia' was originally prompted by the debate around the Salic Law of succession, which excluded women from the throne (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xxix). Similarly, Anslay's *The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes* was part of the royal household's preoccupation over the lack of a male heir for Henry VIII and the resulting need to prepare the ground for the possibility of a female sovereign, which meant providing Mary with an education suitable for the role: a "humanist program of studies" that, as Hope Johnston notes, "would set an important precedent for her sister Elizabeth and other noblewomen in England" (Johnston 2014, xxiv). Paradoxically enough, Pepwell's English print edition omitted Christine de Pizan's name from the title page.

As Bernice A. Carrol points out, it seems that de Pizan's authorship was often suppressed, her work attributed to male authors, and she "ridiculed or dismissed with contempt" (1998, 24). Considering the paratextual apparatus of de Pizan's texts, Jennifer Summit notes that "while the French manuscripts in English libraries announce Christine's authorship in dedicatory epistles and illuminations, the English translations of the same works […] almost universally reassign authorship of her works to men" (2000, 62). She posits that this happened because her works were adapted to the English cultural context following the Hundred Years War, when a new literate aristocracy emerged. Her works were thus "produced by, and packaged as models for, not literate women but gentlemen" (Summit 2000, 68): a new class of literate gentlemen that identified themselves with the female position of de Pizan to find their own position as authors "outside the medieval institutions of *clergie* and *chevalerie* […] refiguring aristocratic masculinity" (ibid., 70, 72). Her name may have been known only to a few by the 16th century, but her works were definitely part of English culture, mainly for the discourses of war, body politic and the woman question[11]. Reflecting on de Pizan's importance in the culture of early English

[11] In 1965, Lily B. Campbell mentioned Caxton's *The Book of Fayttes of Armes* among the four most influential books on war advocating "military theory over experience" (Hoche 2003, 212),

print, Anne E. B. Coldiron disagrees with the points made by other critics and states that the medieval French author was "an authoritative voice […] preserved, publicized, and praised" (2016 [2009]), although not for her most challenging gender issues, which are of special interest to contemporary scholars. "Her early modern English fame," Coldiron maintains, "was greater as a political advisor, a mythographer, and an authoritative wisdom-writer" (ibid.). It is in this very capacity that her voice resonates in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as will be shown in the next section of this paper.

3. "These antique fables": medieval *Dream* and de Pizan's texts

In 5.1 of Shakespeare's *Dream*, Hippolyta and Theseus comment on the young lovers' account of their adventure in the woods and Theseus judges it "more strange than true" (5.1.2) and assimilates it to "antique fables" (5.1.3)[12]. The word "antique", Peter Holland points out, means "old" and puns on "antic", which means "grotesque". As he further explains: "While 'antique' has strong links to the ancient world – 'antique fables' are classical myths, the world which Theseus mocks but to which he himself belongs – 'antic' suggests a world of performance, the theatrical context of a play which this Theseus will

which could have informed plays such as *Henry IV*, yet she was not aware that the French author, whom she calls Christine du Castel, was a woman. Recently, this point has been further developed by Dominique Tieman Hoche (2003), in her doctoral thesis on de Pizan in early modern England, and Paola Pugliatti (2010) has considered de Pizan's ground-breaking theories on the just war to read Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of war in his plays. Not "[hunting] for verbal parallels" but rather piecing together the "remediation and expanding circulation of the pretexts to a then-pressing problem" (2013, 70), Anne E. B. Coldiron discusses the belly fable in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in relation to three medieval versions, including de Pizan's interpretation of it in her *The Book of the Body Politic*. Cristina Malcolmson (2002, 17) has shown that *City of Ladies* had a good currency in early modern England, where it circulated beyond its textual boundaries as testified also by the six tapestries picturing this work, "probably dating from the early sixteenth century" (Campbell 2007, 248), hung in the Wardrobe of Prince Edward and Lady Elizabeth. The same subject was formerly recorded in the Wardrobe of Princess Mary. These tapestries are no longer extant and, to date, it has been impossible to determine the exact topics represented in them (see Bell 2004). Thomas P. Campbell's studies of tapestries at the Tudor court mention other items depicting de Pizan's subjects (2006, 140, 424; 2007, 112, 248, 325).

[12] All references to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are to the Arden edition, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri 2017.

watch but also the one in which he is a character" (1998, 230)[13]. Also, Catherine Belsey underlines that the polysemy of the word 'antique' "implies both 'ancient' and 'antic' (theatrical), and ironically Theseus himself is both"[14]. Theseus's statement, opening the final act and, thus, the resolution of the play, fits well with the rest of the characters too, who are part of an intertextual web coming from the past, masterfully reworked by Shakespeare, who creates, as it were, an "antike work". This phrase, listed by Edward Phillips in his *The New World of English Words* (1658) as a term used in art meaning "a disorderly mixture of divers shapes of men, birds, flowr's, &c."[15], is quite consistent with the mixture of mythical, fairy, fictional and real characters that populate the play, as well as with its intertextual fusion of several sources and discourses from the past.

"Antique fables" are central in *Dream*, and critics have noted and explored them. As Kurt A. Schreyer points out, focusing on the modernity of Shakespeare, one "may miss the extent to which *Dream* is looking backward rather than forward" (2014, 94). Despite its classical allusions, the medieval legacy is overwhelming in the play and this is exemplified by its metatheatrical subplot. Georg Brandes interpreted the representation of the mechanicals as a satire addressed to older forms of theatricalities (1999 [1898]), and Schreyer has recently traced the pre-Reformation origins of the ass's head as linked to the biblical figure of Balaam, arguing "that it is a piece of theatrical artisanry […,] an artifact, and thus a material link, between the mysteries and the London stage" (2014, 74). In her comprehensive study on Shakespeare and Chaucer, Ann Thompson identified *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the play which, together with *Romeo and Juliet*, shows "the most substantial and pervasive influence of Chaucer in the whole canon" and as the most investigated play "in respect of its Chaucerian borrowings" (1978, 88)[16]. In her conclusions, she stresses the fact that, in the play, "as many as four Chaucerian works are used in

[13] On the "Spenserian resonance" of the word 'antique' in Shakespeare's Sonnet 106 see Cheney (2001, 356) and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.3 see Bednarz (1983, 87-88).

[14] https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/a-midsummer-nights-dream/a-midsummer-nights-dream-a-modern-perspective/ (30/08/2023).

[15] https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/lexicon/entry/497/771 (30/08/2023).

[16] First noted by Hales in 1873.

different ways: *The Knight's Tale* for the framing action and parts of the main romantic plot, *The Legend of Good Women* for Pyramus and Thisbe and a brief reference to Dido, *The Merchant's Tale* for the quarrel between Oberon and Titania, and perhaps *The Parlement of Foules* for Theseus's reference to St Valentine's day" (1978, 217). More recently, Martha W. Driver has studied the characterization of the young lovers, the fairies and the mechanicals and concluded that "Shakespeare was more closely familiar with Middle English romance than has been noted previously" (2009, 141). Notwithstanding this wide awareness of the medievalism of *Dream*, de Pizan's work is not taken into account. Yet, Theseus and Hippolyta, Pyramus and Thisbe (and Dido), all stemming from classical literature, had been remediated in the Middle Ages by de Pizan too.

Her version of the story of Theseus and Hippolyta belongs to the first part of the *City of Ladies* (chapter 18), a book explicitly advocating ideas against misogyny and misogamy, so well in tune with the spirit of *Dream*, where the battle of the sexes supplies material for both hilarious comedy and serious considerations and where marriage is central to both the main and subplots and, according to some, even the occasion of its first performance. Hippolyta is one of the foundation stones of de Pizan's allegorical city, where the Amazons are given momentous importance. As Hope Johnston notes, de Pizan conceives of her city within the conceptual framework of the *translatio imperii et studii* but reshapes it by highlighting the significance of legendary women. Introducing the book, the allegorical character of Reason, who leads the argumentation in Part I, equates the foundation of the city with classical (masculine) foundation stories but "allocates twice as much space to her recollection of the formidable status that the Amazon Empire achieved" (Johnston 2014, xxviii).

As many as four chapters are devoted to the renowned warriors of Amazonia, the "best representative[s]" of the virtues and qualities highlighted in Part I, devoted to women who found themselves in the position to hold power because circumstances left them without men, showing aptitude, "courage, boldness, and good judgment" (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xxix). "As one of the foundational and iconic examples of the City of Ladies," Kingston and Bourgault claim, "the community of the Amazons and how it is interpreted sets much of the tone for the rest of the work" (ibid., 51). This also

holds true with respect to the "mutually beneficial partnership between the sexes" (Johnston 2014, xxix) promoted by the book: the Amazons are exemplary women, they banish men from their domain but they are not against men. Hippolyta's story, as a matter of fact, concludes with marriage and she is depicted as matching "in cunning and force" with "the great legislator Theseus" (Kingston and Bourgault 2018, xxix). De Pizan defines their relationship in terms of balance, although the prowess of Hippolyta is emphasized.

Chapter 18 tells "[h]owe the stronge Hercules and Theseus wente upon the Amozones, and howe the .ii. ladyes Menalope and Ypolyte had almoost overcome them" (de Pizan 2014, 79)[17]. In describing the event, Reason first lingers over the endowments of Hercules, "the mervayllous stronge man whiche in his tyme dyde more mervaylles of strength than ever man dyde that was borne of woman" (ibid.). It is he who decides to attack the Amazons and Theseus, "worshypfull and wyse man whiche was kynge of Athenes" (ibid., 81), joins him. In the battle they are confronted by two "worshypful[18] maydens of soverayne strength of chevalrye and hardynesse and wyse above many others […]" (ibid., 83), more precisely Hercules by Manalyppe and Theseus by Hippolyta. De Pizan specifically reports the extraordinary merits of the two Amazons: "so strongly these maydens hurte them and by so grete encountre, eche of theym bete theyr knyght, and they also fell on the other syde. But as soone as they myght, they recovered themselfe and ranne upon them with good swerdes" (ibid.).

Reason praises this incredible deed and interestingly notes how those who reported it tried to find excuses for the Greek warriors, in particular for Hercules. "These .ii. knyghtes were ashamed to be thus beten of these. .ii. maydens. Notwithstandynge, these maydens fought with theyr swerdes ayenst these .ii. knyghtes strongly and the batayle endured longe, yet at the last and what mervayle that these maydens were taken, for there ought not to be lyke strokes bytwene them. Of this pryse they thought them gretely honoured […]" (de Pizan 2014, 83, 85). The two Amazons were made captives and then

[17] All references to de Pizan's *City of Ladies* are to Hope Johnston's edition (2014), with Brian Anslay's 1521 translation.

[18] Both spellings are used by Anslay: 'worshypful' and 'worshypfull'.

released after a peace agreement was reached with the Greeks. Theseus, who fell in love with Hippolyta, was not happy to leave her, "[s]oo Hercules", de Pizan affirms, "prayed and requyred the quene so moche for hym that she graunted Theseus to take Ipolyte unto his wyfe, and so sholde lede her into his countre" (ibid., 85). There followed "weddynges made worshypfully" (ibid.).

Analyzing Shakespeare's Theseus and Hippolyta in relation to Plutarch's/North's and, in particular, Chaucer's versions, Sukanta Chaudhuri identifies a couple of Shakespearean idiosyncrasies. Whereas Chaucer's Theseus is "a judicious and humane ruler [… whose] martial ardour and prowess are never in doubt, […] Shakespeare's Theseus is a low-key figure by contrast, no longer the determining force behind the events" (Chaudhuri 2017, 64). She also notes the numerous, though subtle, hints at the patriarchal attitude of Theseus and more specifically states that "there is much to question but little to seize on Theseus' relations with Hippolyta" (ibid., 66). Chaudhuri suggests different possible readings of the couple's underlying dynamics, taking into account distinct classical accounts of the war between Theseus and the Amazons. She singles out the first scene as the only one in *Dream* in which Hippolyta shows "implicit dissent" (ibid., 67) and then pins down scenes where Hippolyta shows, instead, a certain degree of worthiness, independence and equality with Theseus. Yet, she concludes that any reading of the relationship between the Greek and the Amazon in *Dream* undoubtfully confirms "his dominance [… and] her past exploits are merely a foil to set it off" (ibid., 68). A different conclusion can be reached by contemplating de Pizan's presentation of the couple, which is more coherent with the self-secure attitude of the female character, detected by critics in most of the scenes in *Dream* but the first one.

The proto-feminist medieval account of how the future spouses met, made available by de Pizan, sheds new light on the dialogues between the two of them, in particular the very first. Theseus's "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries; / But I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (1.1.16-17), followed by the woman's enigmatic open silence (see McGuire 1985), is often quoted to exemplify the duke's patriarchalism and interpreted as a metaphoric rape (Levine 1996, 210), but it can also be read as a hyperbolic statement followed by an ironic silence. The man actually won the woman, but only after being first

unhorsed and temporarily defeated by her and also after his friend Hercules interceded for him because he fell in love with her. To the detriment of Theseus's martial masculinity, this female success did not fall into oblivion but was recorded by "so many antentyke doctours" (de Pizan 2014, 83). The word "triumph", more than suggesting that "Theseus' defeat of Hippolyta in war lurks behind their new relationship" (Chaudhuri 2017, 277), seems to be used literally: it implies "another key", i.e. a different attitude, with respect to the un-triumphant victory he achieved.

This first scene, showing an anxious bridegroom and a much more indifferent bride, can imply as much irony as 4.1.111-17, when Theseus's boastful attitude is confronted by Hippolyta, who not only "talks with Theseus as an equal (possibly in a competitive spirit) on the traditionally masculine topic of hounds and hunting" (ibid., 67) but explicitly compares her (apparently not promising) present experience with him with a superb past experience of hers in male company (Hercules and Cadmus). Indeed, his pride is clearly wounded when Hippolyta mentions the musical harmony produced by the dogs using oxymorons that denote eroticism and he feels the need to defend the honour of his hounds (and his own) through a 9-line speech, commending how his dogs are "matched in mouth like bells" (4.1.122). This reading is also coherent with the characterization of the same legendary figures in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, where Hippolyta is credited by the Second Queen to be the one that was "near to make the male / To [her] sex captive" (1.1.80-81) and with "much more power on him [Theseus] / Than ever he had on [her]" (1.1.87-88)[19].

Regarding Pyramus and Thisbe, critics agree on the intricacy of Shakespeare's use of multiple sources. Considering them closely, Kenneth Muir suggests, "may help us to know a little more about Shakespeare's methods of work" (1954, 141). Among the texts mentioned as available to Shakespeare to give the Ovidian tale a new form for the stage, there are many versions by medieval and early modern writers (see Chaudhuri 2017, 60). Surprisingly, although not so much, Christine de Pizan is never mentioned. In her corpus, Pyramus is quickly named (together with Leander, Achilles and others) by the older knight in *The Debate of Two Lovers* (*Debat de deux amans*, 1400), a love

[19] All references to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* are to the revised Arden edition, ed. Lois Potter (Fletcher and Shakespeare 2015). This scene is attributed to Shakespeare.

debate poem dedicated to the Duke of Orléans, which discusses love casuistry just as Lysander and Hermia do in *Dream* 1.1.132-55, and as the play itself does more broadly. Pyramus is referred to when the knight, against the more optimistic ideas advocated by Christine and the younger squire, defends his point that love, which always entails woe, is a tricky emotion that often leads to foolishness and jealousy.

A more extended narrative of Pyramus and Thisbe by de Pizan can be found in two of her other works. Part 2 of *The City of Ladies* includes a chapter titled Thisbe, who is broached as an example of women's faithfulness in love, after Dido, who is praised for the same reason. The story contains all the iconic elements of other sources often mentioned in relation to Shakespeare's work: the wall, the mulberry tree, the lion and the moonlight[20]. Worthy of note is the dramatic monologue of Thisbe, who finds the crack in the wall immediately after begging it to be compassionate and crack, as if to imply a personification of the wall and a direct response to the woman's plea (in Shakespeare Bottom/Pyramus asks the wall to "[s]how [him its] chink, to blink through with [his] eyne", 5.1.175). In Chaucer, the lovers address the wall, but there is no hint of a reaction from it. In addition, de Pizan's text mentions Thisbe's mother as the one who locked the girl in her rooms, a character that is present in Shakespeare in the role of Robin Starveling (1.2.56). Although noteworthy as evidence of the participation of de Pizan in the medieval discourse around Thisbe, this version of the story and its connotations are very close to Chaucer's and are thus not particularly interesting for the purpose of this paper.

More remarkable is the application of the Pyramus and Thisbe story in *The Epistle of Othea*. The story is very similar to the version of the *City of Ladies*, but the context in which it is embedded is significantly different. In this book – a mirror for princes that achieved popularity in the late Middle Ages and was widely circulated in England as both a manuscript in French and in translation – each of the one hundred stories included are used to proffer instructions on knighthood for "a young man of fifteen" (Willard 1984, 94). The main narrative is told in prose in the "gloss", introduced by a four-line "text" (aabb) succinctly summarizing the didactic message meant to be conveyed and

[20] Differences with respect to Shakespeare's version of the same story are the spring as the meeting point instead of Ninus' tomb and the wimple instead of the mantle.

followed by a section called "allegory" (in prose), which further explains the moral of the story. In the case of Pyramus and Thisbe, the account focuses on Pyramus's experience. The man's misinterpretation of the wimple stained with blood prompts the author to exhort the reader in the text with "Trust nothing to be in certainté / Unto that the trouth well knowen be" (Scrope 2020, 73), and with the words of "the wise man" in the gloss: "Yelde thee not to thingis the which ben in doute, afore that thou have had dewe informacion" (ibid., 74). The allegory, instead, identifies Pyramus's mistake in his breaking of the fourth commandment[21]: "Wurschip fadir and modir", "Honora patrem tuum, et gemitus matris tue non obliviscaris" (ibid.)[22].

Both of these didactic objectives are coherent with *Dream*. Filial obligation is an issue in the play (see Hawkes 1992, 32) and the fact that Quince singles out Thisbe's mother and Pyramus's father as characters for his short interlude is quite meaningful in this regard. Since they are absent at the final performance, however, it is difficult to make a case for the role of the biblical commandment in Quince's script. Yet, it is interesting that, at the final performance, "the restrictive devices which keep the lovers apart", as Terence Hawkes states, "find themselves materially represented by a wall (played, curiously, by Snout, who was originally cast to play Pyramus's father) aided and abetted by a moon (played by Starveling, originally cast as Thisbe's mother)" (ibid., 29). It is also difficult to determine whether the biblical commandment was meant to be satirized or supported, because of the different finales in the quarto and Folio editions of *Dream*. Instead, it is easier to link Shakespeare's interlude with the teaching extrapolated from the story by de Pizan/Othea in the text and the allegory: things can be different from what they appear.

The complexity, multiplicity and confusion of identity is omnipresent throughout the play and undoubtedly a theme in the interlude of the mechanicals, which can be considered a comic, yet meaningful, *mise en abyme* of the main plot. In Stuart Millar's reading, there is in *Dream* "a comic and serious discussion of identities in the theatre […]" that reaches "its climax in the play

[21] There are cautionary accounts for each of the Ten Commandments.

[22] References to *The Epistle of Othea* are to Misty Schieberle's edition (2020), with Stephen Scrope's translation, also available at https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/schieberle-scrope-epistle-othea (30/08/2023).

of the mechanicals" (2015, 176). They carefully plan to warn the audience about the difference between their performed and real identities, well aware of the potential risks of misunderstanding. Bottom asks Quince for a prologue explaining "that Pyramus is not killed indeed" (3.1.16-17) and adds: "[F]or the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear" (3.1.18-20). Similarly, Snout suggests the audience should be reminded by another prologue that the actor playing the lion "is not a lion" (3.1.32), and thinking this would not be enough, Bottom advises that the actor's personhood should be visually graspable behind the costume. Following the same principle, Snout as Wall tells the audience: "I, one Snout by name, present a Wall" (5.1.155); and Starveling as Moonshine explains that the "lanthorn doth the horned moon present" (5.1.234). Further suggestion that the interlude can be linked to Pizan's/Othea's admonition is Quince's caveat addressed to the audience: "Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show; / But wonder on, till truth make all things plain" (5.1.126-27).

Chaudhuri states that "the style and staging of Quince's play seem to exclude any serious treatment of love, let alone other historical, philosophical or mystical concerns" (2017, 57), but assuming that de Pizan's wise advice is implied in the production and reception of this comic interlude lends it meaning. It can be seen as a metatheatrical reference to the illusion of the stage but also a reminder of the perils of illusions in the real world, as the main play is. One of the most important themes of *Dream* is, indeed, that "things are not questioned enough, that complexities are glossed over by the play of fancy" (Chaudhuri 2017, 67). De Pizan's versions of Pyramus and Thisbe can thus be coherently considered part of what Sillars calls "the network of learned, serioludic reference" (2015, 171), which forms the texture of *Dream*.

4. Conclusion

The popularity and circulation of de Pizan's works in late medieval and early modern England cannot be disputed. Her texts offered female role models that helped support the recognition of women and the importance of female education, albeit in the restricted context of royal and aristocratic milieus. They also provided fundamental theories on just war and chivalry, while

at the same time redefining the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Most of all, she was read and appreciated for her wisdom narratives, which applied, as it were, old myths and legends within pragmatic contemporary contexts.

Although her name is rarely mentioned in intertextual studies of early modern literature, it seems safe to assume that her works were part of the horizon of expectations of both early modern writers and audiences. The representations she gives of Theseus and Hippolyta and Pyramus and Thisbe, as well as the applied significance she confers them for the reader's edification, can further illuminate the complexities of such references in *Dream* and in its enigmatic rudimental interlude. Further studies on de Pizan's voice in early modern texts by Shakespeare and others may provide useful data to determine her most influential texts and the types of interdiscursivity involved. What seems to be a voice lost in reception is definitely worth recovering in more detail.

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