Virtues as the Building Blocks of Resilience

Christine de Pizan's Educational Project in The Book of the City of Ladies

Cohen de Lara, E.

DOI
10.4324/9781003528692-13

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Rethinking Resilience in Character Education

9

VIRTUES AS THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF RESILIENCE

Christine de Pizan's educational project in *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Emma Cohen de Lara

Introduction

One particular kind of adversity that people may experience is constituted by being stereotyped as member of a specific group, for example, on account of one's gender. Such stereotypes can be present in public debate, in conversation, or in literary and philosophical texts, which put readers down rather than lifting them up. Should these stereotypes be addressed and, if so, how? Does actively addressing stereotypes help to cultivate one's resilience? In this chapter, I will argue that the medieval writer Christine de Pizan's[1] (1364–1431) *The Book of the City of Ladies*, written in 1405, can be read in response to these questions.

Christine's *City of Ladies* describes a walled city that is constructed from stories about virtuous women, and these stories are meant to inspire the reader to develop resilience. A range of virtues may be viewed as the 'building blocks' of resilience. In particular, two kinds of virtues distinguished by Titus (2006) may help students face the hardships and challenges of life, namely virtues of initiative and virtues of endurance. In the *City of Ladies*, and in her own life, Christine particularly promotes and exemplifies virtues of initiative that build resilience in the face of the negative stereotypes that readers may come across in other writings. As a young widow, her resilience was based mainly on virtues of initiative, such as courage and magnanimity, that helped her to take up her pen to secure a living for her family. In her writings, she manifests similar virtues of initiative when she actively addresses and debunks misogynist literature and encourages the reader to follow her example. She appeals to the reader to not succumb to arguments that women are by nature incapable of developing virtues and uses rhetorical strategies to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003528692-13

build the reader's self-esteem and moral confidence. In her later writings, we see a shift toward the virtues of endurance, with an emphasis on patience and sobriety in the face of hardship and sufferings.

In the university classroom, *The Book of the City of Ladies* may be used to help students gain virtue literacy, develop an awareness of situational variables that affect the pursuit of virtue, and reflect on the relationship between virtues of initiative, virtues of endurance, and virtues of resilience.

Christine in her time

Christine de Pizan was born in Venice in 1364. Soon after her birth, her parents moved to Bologna and from there to Paris, where her father took up the position of court physician and astrologist to King Charles V (1338–1380).[2] Christine's father thrived under the rule of King Charles V, called 'the Wise,' who became the patron of a large library and contributed to a thriving manuscript culture by commissioning the French translation of Latin, Greek, and Arabic texts on philosophy, politics, and the natural sciences. By all accounts, Christine's early years were happy ones, and she enjoyed the loving encouragement of her father in learning to read and write. At age 15, Christine married court secretary Etienne de Castel. The marriage turned out to be a joyous one, and Christine gave birth to three children. She now had two intellectual men in her life, her father and her husband.

Soon after her marriage, however, Christine's fate started to change. King Charles V died in 1380, and power struggles at the royal court negatively affected Christine's father's position. Her father died seven years later, and Christine's two brothers left Paris to inherit the family estate in Bologna. In 1390, Christine's beloved husband died during the plague while serving on a court mission. Thus, at age 25, Christine was a widow and the sole caregiver of three children, a widowed mother, and a niece. She was heartbroken after the death of her husband. In her semi-autobiographical *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune* (De Pizan, 1403/2017) she wrote: "The loss [of Etienne] tormented me so that no comfort was worth anything. I was in that state for a long time, rejecting all pleasures, with no hope of ever having happiness or joy" (p. 47). She would later channel her grief into poems, such as 'I Am a Widow Lone,' 'If Mourning I Now Wear,' 'This Mask No Grief Reveals,' 'Like the Mourning Dove,' and the popular 'Alone Am I' (De Pizan, 1994).

At the same time, during this time of grief, Christine was responsible for the finances of the family with meager resources at her disposal. She deplored the traditional custom that women were kept in the dark about their husband's financial affairs, and when she reached out for help, she soon learnt that not all friends and acquaintances could be trusted. She became entangled

in a number of legal cases involving property, her late husband's debtors, and the funds set aside for her children's future. These cases lasted over 14 years and drained her energy and resources. Christine struggled and, in addition, suffered a prolonged illness in 1392. Looking back on this period in her life in her semi-autobiographical *The Vision* (1405/2005), she writes: "It was astonishing how Fortune could hound me with such vengeance . . . What happened to me was against all reason" (p. 97).

Under these difficult circumstances, Christine developed a remarkable resourcefulness and drive. In *The Vision*, she writes that upon the death of her husband "it behooved me to set to work . . . and take the helm of the captainless ship [her household] in midstorm . . . [as] troubles surged upon me from all sides" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 96). In *The Book of the Mutatibility of Fortune*, in which she pursues the metaphor of the captainless ship, she writes that she learnt to be "very capable of making use of whatever was necessary to guide the ship . . . I had to be that way, by necessity, in order to rescue myself and my household, if I did not want to die" (De Pizan, 1403/2017, p. 47). She attributes certain masculine characteristics – assertiveness, courage, practical judgment, physical stamina, resolve, vigor – to the kind of virtues that were called for by her circumstances as widow. On two occasions, she writes that she felt herself 'becoming a man' when taking on a man's responsibilities and cultivating the boldness she needed to execute those responsibilities. By means of an "Ovidian metamorphosis," she was:

> transformed from a woman into a man . . . [Fortune] manipulated every limb . . . I [Christine] awoke . . . my limbs were much stronger than before, and my great despondency and grieving had faded somewhat . . . my flesh was transformed and stronger, my voice much fuller, and my body harder and quicker . . . I found my heart strong and bold, which astonished me, but I felt that I had become a true man . . . Thus I was a true man – it is not a fiction – capable of guiding ships.
>
> *(De Pizan, 1403/2017, pp. 44–47)*

As in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, where transformations often occur when violence is inflicted upon a victim, and the victim then becomes part of the natural landscape, Christine sees herself as having been transformed by circumstances from a woman into a man to adjust to her new situation in life. Her claim that this "is not a fiction" shows the ambiguity that she feels about the transformation; her circumstances did not physically make her a man, even though this is what she seems to say, but they required her to develop manly characteristics such as assertiveness, strength, and boldness. Together, these characteristics are important components of the virtue of initiative (Titus, 2006). Since her widowhood is irreversible, so "she will remain a man" (De Pizan, 1403/2017, p. 48). Likewise, and no doubt drawing on her

own experiences, in *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, she advises that a widow should "take on the heart of a man" and to be "constant, strong, and wise in judging and pursuing her advantage, not crouching in tears, defenseless, like some simple woman or like a poor dog who retreats into a corner while all the other dogs jump on him" (1405/1989, pp. 199–200).

The resilience that Christine demonstrates in the face of her challenges was based primarily on the virtue of initiative. Christine associates this virtue with masculinity. This may not be a particularly welcome message in our own gender-sensitive times, but Christine wrote during the late Middle Ages, and for us begs the question of whether resilience based on the virtue of initiative has a masculine quality. Courage, closely related to resilience (Titus, 2006), has traditionally been considered a typically male virtue. The Greek *andreia* (courage, especially on the battlefield) has *andros* (man or warrior) at its root; the word *virtue* has *vir* (man) as its Latin root. Christine, both in her own life and in various writings, advises and instructs women to develop a variety of 'masculine' characteristics – strength, decisiveness, prudence, courage, loyalty, perseverance – when called for by circumstances. Her pedagogical aims focus on showing women – whether widowers, queens, princesses, heads of households, wives, tradeswomen, farmers, or even prostitutes – that they are capable of achieving these virtues and, as we will see, she encourages women to develop them. As Cosman (1989) writes:

> Christine demanded assertive courage of intelligent women so that they might thrive in adversity. To prepare them for exigencies, she gave explicit instructions . . . Christine, superb pedagogue of practical morality, suggested that reading her advice would encourage a woman to endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and some men's inhumanity to women.
>
> *(p. 11)*

Christine and misogynist literature

For Christine, the manly assertiveness she had acquired while learning how to manage her household affairs served her well while she developed her professional life as a woman of letters. After her husband's death, in the face of financial hardships, she may have earned some money copying manuscripts. In addition, having mastered the official handwriting, she helped prepare documents for the royal court (Willard, 1984). Around 1399 or possibly earlier (Willard, 1984), Christine's eldest son moved to England to the Earl of Salisbury's household. By that time, her second son had died from unknown causes, and her daughter had entered a convent at Poissy. Christine was now free of the responsibilities of parenthood, and she started to read ferociously, immersing herself in history, science, and poetry. About the poets, she writes:

"I was glad to find in them a style that seemed natural to me, and took pleasure in their subtle allegories and lovely material hidden beneath delightful moral fictions" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 104). She begins to compose poetry herself, and by 1402 she had written enough to issue a collection of ballads. These sold well, if only, as she claims herself, because of the novelty that they were written by a woman (De Pizan, 1405/2005).

She showed real initiative, however, in the active stand that she took in a major public literary debate. In 1399, she wrote her poem *Poems of Cupid, God of Love* (De Pizan, 1399/1990), which set off a public discussion – largely between court secretaries – about the literary merits of *The Romance of the Rose*. The first part of *The Romance of the Rose* was written circa 1236 by Guillaume de Lorris in praise of courtly love. Forty-five years later, circa 1275, the court scribe Jean de Meun added a long and significant second part to the poem, after which it became extremely popular. *The Romance of the Rose* (de Lorris & de Meun, 1236–1275/1971) describes a love affair as experienced by allegorical characters in a dreamworld. A young man sets out to 'pluck a rose,' that is, to chase his Lady until he succeeds in obtaining his desire by overcoming the allegorical character of Chastity, representing his Lady's modesty. Jean de Meun's supplement to the poem was more satirical than that it was a serious encomium to courtly love. Meun was keen to point out that the lover's happiness was short-lived, and when he pursued his Lady again, the allegorical characters of Jealousy, False Appearance, Forced Abstinence, and Slander put obstacles in his path. Thus, courtly love is depicted as false and artificial because of feminine duplicity and treacherousness (Willard, 1984).

In *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*, Christine counters the anti-feminist attitudes and duplicitous behavior of men who lure women into illicit love under the guise of courtly love. In this poem, Cupid orders men to love women properly and virtuously. The debate that ensued through letters and publications led Christine in 1402 to collect various documents supporting her point of view and present them to the queen (Willard, 1984). As Willard (1989) writes, "one must still wonder at her courage in publicly taking to task several royal secretaries who prided themselves on their intellectual accomplishments" (p. 27). The debate finally abated, but it gave Christine the zeal with which she could continue her crusade against the unjust slander of women.

Christine turned from poetry to prose and, in 1405, she finished her two masterpieces *The Book of the City of Ladies* (De Pizan, 1405/1999) and *The Treasury of the City of Ladies* (1405/1989). In the former, she engages with and counters the arguments of another anti-feminist text, namely Matheolus' *Lamentations* (ca. 1295/1992), which is a harsh, misogynistic discourse, condemning women as wicked and lewd and comparing marriage to purgatorial fire. Christine, writing in the first person, debunks these arguments with the help of three celestial ladies who encourage her to call upon women of great

virtue in history and mythology to support her argument that a woman's capacity for virtue is equal to that of a man's. She rejects prevailing negative stereotypes about women and actively formulates a different and more valid understanding of woman's ability to achieve virtue.

Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*

The Book of the City of Ladies describes a walled city that is inhabited by virtuous women only.[3] The stories about these women are derived from different sources, such as the Old and New Testaments, Greek and Roman traditions, and Assyrian legends. As a fortress, the walled city is an autonomous place where women are self-sufficient, self-governing, and safe. The building blocks of the city are a metaphor for the stories about these women and their virtues. Virtues, so Christine seem to say, offer protection. Ultimately, the walled city may be viewed as a bastion that represents women's resilience when faced with cultural prejudices.

The Book of the City of Ladies belongs to the genre of biographical catalog (McLeod, 1991; Brown-Grant, 1999), which originated in antiquity with Plutarch, who in *Parallel Lives* wrote about 48 famous men in pairs to illustrate their moral qualities and failures. The genre became popular again during the early Renaissance with Petrarch's *On Illustrious Men* (1337–1374), and Christine herself borrows several examples from Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* (1374/1963). The purpose of these biographies was instructional; the lives of famous men and women were meant to inspire virtuous behavior and help readers avoid moral mistakes. Christine inserted her own 'catalogue' into this tradition; with the title **The Book** *of the City of Ladies*, she indicated that it belonged in libraries. Indeed, Christine expects her contribution to be a lasting one, as it provides "an honourable and permanent place" for women to dwell (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 198). With *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine deftly establishes herself as a female authority within a traditionally male discourse on literature.

The protagonist as a role model

The Book of the City of Ladies (De Pizan, 1405/1999) was written in the first person and starts out with a memorable scene in which Christine is studiously at work in her study, surrounded by books. She decides to take a break to read some poetry and chances upon a text that had been given to her for safekeeping, namely Matheolus' *Lamentations* (ca. 1295/1992). Unfortunately, Christine, who was expecting amusement, is confronted with a harsh, misogynistic discourse. She becomes despondent, wondering: "why on earth it was that so many men, both clerks and others, have said and continue to say and write such awful, damning things about women and their

ways . . ." (De Pizan, 1405/1999, pp. 5–6). Even when she has examined her own behavior and that of other women and "could find no evidence from [her] own experience to bear out such a negative view of female nature and habits," she caves in and concludes that her own thinking must be "too crude and ill-informed" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 6). She is sad and astounded that God could have created woman as a "vessel in which all the sin and evil of the world has been collected and preserved" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 6) and feels sick at heart and miserable for having received the female form. At this point, Christine is visited by three allegorical ladies – Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice – who inspire her to take up her pen and prove such misogynist literature wrong.[4]

The first to help Christine is Lady Reason, who instructs her how to critically read philosophical, theological, and literary texts, including Matheolus' *Lamentations*. This is where Christine's pedagogical mission begins: just as Lady Reason teaches Christine, Christine teaches the reader. Lady Reason explains that authorities disagree among themselves, and therefore they should not be considered irrefutable. She encourages Christine to read dialectically by going back and forth between the text and her own experiences and intuitions and to do so with confidence, so that she no longer dismisses what she knows to be true even when confronted with opposing majority opinions. Lady Reason advices her to view an adverse opinion as something that may strengthen and improve her own opinion, because, metaphorically speaking, "[i]t is in the furnace that gold is refined" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 8).

Pushing critical reading even further, Lady Reason instructs Christine to deliberately interpret negative arguments in a positive way, turning the argument into one's advantage "no matter what the author's original intention was" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 8). This method of *antiphrasis*, which is often used in courtrooms to develop a position that refutes the accusation, is a rhetorical device whereby a text or situation is interpreted as meaning the opposite (*anti-*) of what it explicitly says (*-phrasis*), or elements are extracted that are useful to one's own argument (De Pizan, 1405/1999).

Thus, many clear, and often humorous, instances of an antiphrastic interpretation can be found in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. One example is the story of Circe, best known as the treacherous sorceress in Homer's *Odyssey* who changed Odysseus' men into swine. In *Concerning Famous Women*, Boccaccio (1374/1963) presents Circe as a wicked woman who used her beauty and her knowledge of herbs to attract men and gave them poisonous potions that turned them into animals; she turned them back into humans only after Odysseus threatened to kill her. In Christine's version, however, the whole incident is interpreted as a mistake. When Odysseus sent his companions to the island, "Circe thought they had come to harm her and so gave his men this potion to drink which immediately turned them into swine" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 63). Circe undid the spell when Odysseus

explained that his men merely sought permission to land on her island. In other words, in Christine's version, Circe did not act out of wickedness but out of prudence and in self-defense, and she proved to be entirely reasonable when the misunderstanding had been cleared up.

Another example of an antiphrastic interpretation is the story of the Assyrian Queen Semiramis. According to legend, Semiramis reigned over much of Asia after her husband's death, and she achieved fame for having conquered and rebuilt the city of Babylonia. In the literary tradition, Semiramis became a controversial woman who committed incest by forcing her own son to marry her. It was for this reason that Dante consigned Semiramis to the second circle of Hell, the final destination of the lustful and adulterers (Quilligan, 1991). Likewise, Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* presents Semiramis as a counterexample to virtue, condemning her for her "wicked sin" (1374/1963, p. 6). In Christine's version of the story, however, the transgression is excused. She argues that Semiramis' marriage was not an act of wicked sin but an act of prudence, since it would prevent another woman from ruling her empire. Furthermore, Semiramis was justified in taking her son in marriage because "in her opinion, no other man than her son was worthy of her" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 36). She adds that in Semiramis' time, incest was not prohibited by law. She omits the end of the story in which Semiramis is killed by her own son whom she had forced to marry her.

In short, a critical and, at times, antiphrastic interpretation of traditional stories, allows Christine to rewrite traditional stories. Christine inspires her readers to read in a similar way, not only because she passes on the instructions from Lady Reason but also because she describes how she herself has grown from a humble and despondent woman burdened by the stereotypes of the misogynist literature to a triumphant woman who refuses to hold her tongue and who, despite attacks against her person, continues to speak up.

As Christine develops her stories, under the guidance and instruction of the three Ladies, we see her growing in confidence. Midway through *The Book of the City of Ladies*, she states "As far as I can see, my lady [Rectitude], all forms of goodness and virtue can be found in the female sex. So why is it that these men say that so few are chaste?" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 141). A conversation follows, with many examples of chaste women and not so chaste men. Christine's confidence culminates with the story of the Christian martyr Saint Christine, whose name she shared. Saint Christine was tortured by her father because she worshipped Christ instead of the city's pagan idols. When her father died, various Roman officials tried to stop her proselytizing, but she continued with unwavering faith and succeeded in converting numerous people. In the climax of the story, one of the officials tortures her extensively with fire and serpents and finally has her breasts torn off – a stringent attack on her femininity. But "milk rather than blood poured forth from her wounds," a sign of her innocence and spiritual fertility (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 222).

When this still does not stop her from proclaiming her Christian faith, the official cut out her tongue. Saint Christine then spits out the remainder of her tongue in his face, blinding him, and speaks: "It's only fitting that my tongue should have blinded you, since you didn't believe my words in the first place" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 223). Christine clearly identifies with her patron saint, considering herself "a poor sinner who bears your name" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 223). The story is a marked literary counterpart to the beginning of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, when Christine was "far too dumbfounded to utter a single word" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 9), and characterizes her remarkable moral trajectory from doubting meekness to confident resilience.

Judicious reading and a conscious reformulation of traditional stories about famous women provided Christine with renewed trust in her own feminine experience, giving her the confidence she needed to continue advocating on behalf of women's moral worth. As MacIntyre (2007) has argued, human beings are 'storytelling animals' who understand themselves and their actions as part of the narrative that they live out. Still, human beings are only partly agents of the stories that they tell themselves, and their moral agency is curtailed by the social narratives that they are born into: "We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 216). Christine sought to change the stage for women. She wanted to alter the social perceptions of women by way of attractive stories that challenge misogynist stereotypes and provide women with the confidence to be able to live virtuous lives. As McLeod (1991) writes, *The Book of the City of Ladies* is written in ardent belief that, more than they know, "women . . . can make themselves" (p. 137).

Resilience through virtues of initiative

Besides being a role model herself as the protagonist of the book, the stories that make up the *City of Ladies* offer many inspiring role models as well. Christine is adamant that women with any social role can develop virtue and that, together, virtuous women make up a robust, 'walled' community. If we take the walled city as a metaphor for women's resilience and the building blocks of the city as a metaphor for the virtues of these women, then the question arises which virtues contribute to resilience.

In *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude*, Titus (2006) presents the virtue of fortitude as a 'placeholder' for resilience and argues for a taxonomy of two groups of virtue that strengthen resilience. The first group is constituted by 'virtues of initiative' and comprise magnanimity defined as being worthy of great honors and magnificence defined as attaining greatness in deeds. Both

of these are infused, according to Titus, by the theological virtue of hope. The second group is constituted by the 'virtues of endurance' and include patience, longanimity defined as knowing how to wait, perseverance, and constancy. In this chapter I have argued that Christine, in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, advocates virtues of initiative. She can be said to promote both magnanimity and magnificence, in that the women in the *City of Ladies* excel in deeds worthy of great honors and attain greatness in their actions. Nevertheless, her approach is broader in the sense that any virtue appropriate to a woman's role and station in life feeds into the robustness of the city. Among the over one hundred stories of virtuous women that make up the *City of Ladies*, we find an emphasis on five specific virtues that, I argue, can be considered as belonging to the group of 'virtues of initiative' as well: prudence bordering on cunningness and prudence in governing, physical stamina, inventiveness, and resourcefulness.

The virtue of 'prudence bordering on cunningness' may apply to the story of Semiramis, who 'prudently' married her own son and who Christine honors as the first building block for the foundations of the *City of Ladies*.

As examples of 'prudence in governing,' Christine offers a range of stories of women who rule judiciously: the Ethiopian empress Nicaula, who established laws and good customs bringing civilization to her subjects; the French queen Fredegunde who, even though she was "unnaturally cruel for a woman" (p. 31), ruled judiciously over the kingdom of France after her husband's death until her son was old enough to assume the throne; and queen Artemisia who, according to Christine, upon the death of her husband "was left with many lands to govern but was not in the least troubled by this as she had the right qualities needed to rule a country, being honest, sober in manner and politically astute" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 50). Artemisia, according to Christine's rendition of the story, also exemplifies marital loyalty because she poured liquid over her late husband's ashes and drank the mixture providing for his tomb with her own body. 'Prudence in governing' is also demonstrated by women who need to run a household. For example, the Roman Gaia Cirilla was "esteemed above all women for managing her household well and seeing attentively to everything" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 81).

'Physical stamina' is perhaps best exemplified by the stories about the Amazons, who – like Semiramis – form the foundations of the city. These legendary female warriors, who ruled without men, had one of their breasts removed so that they could easily carry a shield or handle a bow. They "took such pleasure in the pursuit of arms that they greatly expanded their territory by the use of force, thus spreading their fame far and wide" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 38). When the Persian king Cyrus kills one of their beloved sons, the Amazonian queen Thamiris shows no mercy: all Cyrus' generals are beheaded in front of him and, finally, his own head is cut off and thrown into a barrel.

An example of 'inventiveness' is apparent in the story of the Phoenician Elissa, who flees from her brother, the wicked King Pygmalion, to Africa. There, she asks the inhabitants if she can buy a piece of land no bigger than what can be covered by the hide of a cow. When they agree, she takes the cowhide and cuts it into the tiniest strips possible and ties the strips together to form a rope. The rope was laid out near the seashore, where it enclosed a large plot of land; this became the "mighty city called Carthage" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 85). Elissa ruled the city with "wisdom and prudence" and "became so renowned for her heroic qualities that her name was changed to Dido, which means 'virago' in Latin: in other words, a woman who has the virtue and valour of a man" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 85).

Finally, 'resourcefulness' is illustrated by the story of Lilia, mother of Theodorus. Theodorus was a handsome knight at the court of Constantinople. His mother raised him well, but after he was enlisted by the Romans, he fled the battlefield when the situation deteriorated. His mother remonstrated with him, but her words had no effect. She then "fell into a great rage and lifted up her skirts, saying: 'My dear son, there is no place left for you to hide except my womb, so you should climb back up inside immediately!'" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 52). Theodorus immediately returned to the battlefield and killed the invader Odoacer, thus saving Italy.

Overall, Christine's women are tough and resourceful, and society should be grateful to them. Nevertheless, Christine remains sensitive to the gender of her subjects; her women display manly virtue without denying their gender. Instead, their virtuousness is manifested within the social roles that belong to their gender, as queens, princesses, wives, mothers, daughters, widows, or virgins. And they often use their femininity – their charm and their beauty, and even their womb – alongside the raw physical strength that may be considered as more of a masculine trait.

Responding to Matheolus' original argument that women are a burden in marriage, Christine provides a range of stories about virtuous wives, such as Sarah, who remains faithful to Abraham even though she was sought after by kings; Rebecca who was considered a model of humility and chastity so favored by God that He sent her twins even though she was old and infertile; and Portia nobly keeping her husband's secrets. She praises daughters who look after their parents, up to a woman who breastfeeds her mother in prison.

Christine closes *The Book of the City of Ladies* stating that the city is entirely "made of virtuous material" and, in this way, shelters, defends, and protects women against attackers (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 237). She encourages all women to cultivate the humility exemplified by the Virgin Mary, she recommends that wives of good husbands serve them with devotion, while the wives of bad husbands should strive for peaceable coexistence, as "patience is the key to paradise and the way of Jesus Christ"

(De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 238), and she advices young women to guard their chastity against the deceitful ways of men, while her message to widows is this: be "devout in your words and deeds, prudent in the way you run your affairs, and patient, strong and resilient in the face of suffering and aggravation" (De Pizan, 1405/1999, p. 239).

The civic dimension

Before we turn to a different set of virtues that become evident in Christine's later writings, it is interesting to point out that *The Book of the City of Ladies* presents a civic aspect to the virtues of initiative.[5] Christine's outlook on virtue was inspired by the morality of the early Italian Renaissance, which emphasized civic engagement and understood rhetoric – and Christine's writings are strongly rhetorical – as civic reason (*civilis ratio*), that is, essential for public expression and persuasion.[6] She had a keen perception of the civic and political role of women in history and "the political nature of the commonplace" (Cosman, 1989, p. 25). In her writings, she is adamant that women from all ranks of life should be able to hold their own, make a contribution to society, and control the conditions of their lives that make or break them (Willard, 1984). This emphasis on an active life provides a good fit with the virtues of initiative as building blocks for resilience, since an active life involves assertiveness, drive, resolve, and tenacity.

We may justly consider Christine part of the rhetorical tradition that emphasizes the education of free citizens according to the highest ideals of character and virtue (Kimball, 1995). Christine's virtuous women have social and political roles as rulers, queens, warriors, military leaders, heads of households, and saints. They are strong women who, by means of their valor, cunningness, prudence, constancy, and strength hold their own in pursuing the common good. In the *City of Ladies*, Christine shows that women are just as capable as men – if not more so – in that they can achieve the virtues that foster resilience in themselves and in their community. She envisages a self-sufficient city in the classical tradition of a Greek polis, as described by Aristotle in book one of *The Politics* (350 BCE/1996). Self-sufficiency means that a city can provide for both material and ethical welfare. A self-sufficient city lacks in nothing; it is well-governed, just, pious, and safe. The virtues of the women in Christine's city contribute to the common good, that is, these virtues necessarily have a civic dimension.

Resilience through virtues of endurance

Although Christine promotes virtues of initiative both in her own life and in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, her resilience is occasionally fostered by virtues of endurance. At several instances in *The Vision*, she describes

herself as not naturally gifted with patience (De Pizan, 1405/2005). In this sense, the virtues of endurance did not provide a good fit with her character and her circumstances. She attributes her bitterness about her tribulations to her inability to endure: "Oh virtue of patience, I did not always have you at hand; rather bitterness would often trample you underfoot in me" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 97). Still, in the third part of *The Vision*, Christine adopts an explicitly Christian framework and repeatedly emphasizes that those who patiently suffer trials and tribulations are blessed because they find solace in the company of Christ the sufferer and have hope in the afterlife. In line with Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy tells Christine: "the misadventures that have come your way in this world, which you attribute to ill Fortune, are advantageous to you" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 113). Lady Philosophy points out that Christine owes her life of study and the discovery of her vocation for writing, both of which she enjoyed so much, to the misfortune of having lost her husband, since this freed her from marital responsibilities. Sufferings are presented as beneficial to the soul and, rather than becoming impatient, Christine is advised by Lady Philosophy to endure them lovingly. She refers to Saint Ambrose: "In this you have the great virtue of patience if suffering from trials, you praise God's judgments, if you suffer illness, you give thanks. And in whatever state you are sorely afflicted, all the greater is your benefit" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 124). Christine knows she is deficient in patience, but she writes that it is a "noble virtue" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 124). Again, she refers to Saint Ambrose: "It is this [the noble virtue of patience] above all which is the chief doorkeeper of paradise and without it there are no other virtues" (De Pizan, 1405/2005, p. 124).

This is indeed a different approach to resilience, namely not growing out bold initiative but relying on the patient endurance of life's ills. Life is viewed as a pilgrimage fraught with challenges, and patient and wise endurance of these challenges may be the only way toward genuine understanding, happiness, sovereignty over oneself, and, finally, hope for the afterlife.[7] During this earthly life, Lady Philosophy offers consolation, because she brings knowledge and wisdom, goods that cannot be taken away from one, unlike worldly goods such as wealth, honor, fame, and pleasure.

The emphasis on patience also features in Christine's advice to princesses in *The Treasury of the City of Ladies* (1405/1989). She urges them to guard against pride and states that the "virtue of humility will make the noble lady patient. Although the world brings ample adversity to great lords and ladies as well as to the lowly, she will never be resentful no matter what happens" (De Pizan, 1405/1989, p. 83). Patience in the face of adversity brings "great constancy, courage, and force of character" (De Pizan, 1405/1989, p. 84). Citing Saint Gregory in the *Moralia*, she writes: "Nobody is perfect who does not have patience with the damage his neighbors may inflict upon him" (De Pizan, 1405/1989, p. 84). Enduring suffering and wrongdoing patiently

allows the princess to remain merciful and guards her soul against anger and agitation. It also helps her to maintain a discreet manner even toward those whom she knows are envious of her, helping her to maintain an attitude of "disciplined dissemblance" (De Pizan, 1405/1989, p. 107).

The shift from promoting an 'initiative-taking' approach to hardship toward the patient endurance of ills continues in Pizan's later writings, such as *The Book of Peace* (1414) and *Letter Concerning the Prison of Human Life* (1418), which were both written as consolation for the multitude of women of France who mourned men lost in the Battle of Agincourt (1415) during the Hundred Years' War between France and England. The troubles of her country ran parallel to Christine's personal suffering. In 1425, her son Jean died in exile, leaving behind a widow and three children. By then, Christine had joined her daughter at the Abbey of Poissy, where she lived for the rest of her life. In this convent, she wrote *Hours of Contemplation on Our Lord's Passion*, in which the suffering of Christ is translated into a Book of Hours with themes for meditation. *Hours* describes Christine as seeking consolation in the Scriptures to guide her in her cultivation of patience (De Pizan, 1428/1994).

In short, there were times in Christine's life that her resilience was based not so much on virtues of initiative but on virtues of endurance, which is characterized by patience, hope, piety, and sobriety. This shift may be explained by the circumstances. Whereas resilience while advocating for a change in the social perceptions of women calls for virtues of initiative, resilience in the face of personal hardships calls for virtues of endurance. At the same time, the virtue of prudence may function as a meta-virtue that orchestrates these two kinds of virtues and determines which is pertinent to which circumstance or phase of life (Kristjánsson and Fowers, 2024).

Nevertheless, Christine's tendency toward active and assertive initiative-taking did not dissipate. Near the end of her life, in 1429, the young female military leader Joan of Arc encouraged the French army in Orleans to aggressively pursue the English during the Loire campaign, culminating in a victorious battle and the crowning of Charles VII. Ecstatic, Christine was the first to write a poem celebrating Joan of Arc's heroism. *The Poem of Joan of Arc* (1429/1994) vindicates female valor although Christine attributes a much great share of the military victory to divine providence now than in her earlier work. Still, in Joan of Arc she saw the superior energy, resolve, and decisiveness that she had long claimed women were capable of.

Christine's contribution to character education

The Book of the City of Ladies was meant to affect the ethics of the reader, in line with the medieval understanding that literature constituted direct ethical discourse (Allen, 1982). Whereas a modern reader might be fazed by

Christine's tendency to twist certain facts as part of her antiphrastic rendition of stories, medieval readers may have been less bothered by historical inaccuracies, as they "were accustomed to looking for ethical truths in fictional stories" (Mcleod, 1991, p. 118). Furthermore, whereas modern readers may be put off by Christine's direct and authoritative rhetoric, accustomed as we are to novels with ingenious plots that "show" rather than "tell" (Booth, 1961), we can still sense the joy that her short stories must have evoked among her educated audience. Christine's stories are delightful, and she deliberately sought to enchant her readers to instruct them.

In accordance with Semple (2018), I propose that Christine's writings remain relevant and have a contemporary value for educating university students. First, her writings contribute to a "dialogue that increases virtue literacy" (Brant et al., 2022, p. 128), as students are encouraged to reflect on the different ways in which Christine shows how resilience may be fostered by virtues of initiative and virtues of endurance, besides the many other virtues that she admires and promotes. Christine's writings may have particular value for increased virtue literacy because there is ambiguity in her writings. For example, should we view Semiramis – marrying her own son – as an emblem of prudence? And what about the virtue of the French queen Fredegunde, who was prudent and resilient but also remarkably cruel?

This leads us to the second way in which Christine's writings may contribute to character education, namely by means of "engagement with virtuous exemplars" (Brant et al., 2022, p. 124). Here, it may be particularly interesting for students to consider how Christine, as the author and protagonist in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, provides a virtuous example. As we have seen, Christine presents herself as a scholar who gains confidence by reading literature while continuing to trust her own intuitions and experiences. She gives a highly effective account of how a female scholar may hold her ground and redirect cultural (mis-)perceptions. Her persona provides an interesting example as part of discussions of the virtues required for scholarship and of ways to navigate prejudices in society.

Third, Christine's writings, especially when read in the context of her own life and times, may contribute to character education by creating an "awareness of situational variables (Brant et al., 2022, p. 131). On account of her gender and her position as a widow, Christine, more than many writers in the traditions of virtue ethics, was aware of the ways in which situational variables and cultural influences shape character and behavior. As I argued in this chapter, she sought to change contemporary literary perceptions of women as naturally incapable of virtue. Her dilemmas allow students to reflect on how cultural and social biases may impede the cultivation of virtues.

Finally, Booth (1988) coined the phrase that great books make great friends. The reader who delves into Christine's world and writings achieves a certain intimacy with her thinking and, especially, with her passion and

drive, which may result in a kind of friendship. While it is not a "friendship of *mutual* accountability" (Brant et al., 2022, p. 135, emphasis added), there is some linear accountability in which Christine's life and stories provide inspiration for virtuous – that is courageous, prudent, patient, and loyal – living in the face of challenges and hardships.

Some practical suggestions may be relevant when Christine's *The Book of the City of Ladies* is read in the classroom in the context of character education. Since *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a relatively long text, reading should focus on a selection, such as the prologue, certain stories from each of the three parts, and the epilogue. One of the assignments could be that students are asked to select two stories and compare Christine's rendition to those in Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*; this allows students to investigate how Christine rewrote the original stories. Other assignments could require students to investigate how women are portrayed in literary texts today, or to rewrite a modern story of a woman in a Pizanian way, that is, critically and antiphrastically. Students could also be asked to write a paper that reflects on how these assignments have possibly affected their own virtue, self-esteem, and resilience. In all, this way of addressing *The Book of the City of Ladies* may contribute to increased virtue literacy, engagement with virtuous examples, an awareness of situational variables, and friendship with a feisty, tenacious, loving, and disciplined woman of letters living in a very different time and place but sharing in the quest for a good life.

Conclusion

Christine's *The Book of the City of Ladies* involves a large number of stories about virtuous women from different traditions and invites the reader to understand resilience as an outcome of the virtuous life. As we have seen in this chapter, Christine particularly promotes virtues of initiative, such as courage, prudence bordering on cunningness, prudence in governing, physical stamina, inventiveness, and resourcefulness, that women are capable of and that are needed to sustain oneself especially in the face of negative stereotypes. This chapter moreover shows a different set of virtues that are encouraged in Christine's later writings, such as patience, hope, piety, and sobriety, which contribute to resilience in times of personal loss. Even today, Christine's writings may provide the reader with encouragement to develop virtues that contribute to resilience.

Notes

1 Christine de Pizan is generally called by her first name, Christine, which in her time was not uncommon. Her literary works are listed in the bibliography under the name of Pizan.

2 This section is based on Willard (1984).
3 Brown-Grant (1999) notes that the walled city could be a reference to Augustine's *City of God*, which proposes a community held together by a common love of God and pursuit of virtue. Another interpretation could be that the walled city is a symbol for a woman's chastity. In Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*, the Lady's stormed castle represents the failure of female chastity. In response, Pizan's sturdy and virtuous city might form a positive counterexample. In this chapter, I take the walled city to be a symbol of resilience.
4 The scene resonates with the biblical Annunciation story (Brown-Grant, 1999). The beam of light that shines into Christine's lap is a reference to the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception. The appearance of the three ladies is sudden, just as Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel unexpectedly. Both were depicted as sitting in a study with books open, wearing a blue robe, the symbol of truth. Both are comforted by the messenger(s) and both receive a communication about the immortality of the outcome; Christine hears that her city "will last for all eternity" (Pizan, 1999, p. 12). And both submit humbly to the divine message. For a medieval audience, the humility formula, with Christine being visited by divine wisdom rather than being the source of wisdom herself, was important (Cosman, 1989). Humility formula also works to generate sympathy for the protagonist, and even the modern reader may also be able to recognize herself in the protagonist's despondency (Felski, 2008).
5 This observation connects to the chapter by Sergio R. Clavero García in the current volume.
6 See McLeod (1991) for the way in which the structure of *The Book of the City of Ladies* closely follows the structure of judicial rhetoric.
7 The image of life as a pilgrimage that requires endurance connects to the chapter by Salomea Slobodian in the current volume.

References

Allen, J.B. (1982) *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Aristotle (350BCE/1996) *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*. Ed. S. Everson, Trans. B Jowett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Boccaccio, G. (1374/1963) *Concerning Famous Women*. Trans. G. Guarino. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
Booth, W.C. (1988) *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Booth, W.C. (1961) *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Brant, J., E. Brooks & M. Lamb (Eds.) (2022) *Cultivating Virtue in the University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Brown-Grant, R. (1999) *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women. Reading Beyond Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Cosman, M.P. (1989) Christine de Pizan's Well-Tempered Feminism. In de Pizan, C. (Ed.) & Willard, C.C. (Trans.) *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor. The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. New York: Persea Books, pp. 11–26.
De Pizan, C. (1418/1983) *The Epistle of the Prison of Human Life*. Trans. J. Wisman. New York: Taylor Francis.
De Pizan, C. (1405/1989) *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor. The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. Trans. C.C. Willard. New York: Persea Books.
De Pizan, C. (1399/1990) *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*. Trans. T.S. Fenster. Leiden: Brill.

De Pizan, C. (1428/1994) Hours of Contemplation on Our Lord's Passion. In Willard, C.C. (Ed.) *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*. New York: Persea Books, pp. 346–347.
De Pizan, C. (1429/1994) The Poem of Joan of Arc. In Willard, C.C. (Ed.) *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*. New York: Persea Books, pp. 352–363.
De Pizan, C. (1994) *The Writings of Christine de Pizan*. Ed. C.C. Willard. New York: Persea Books.
De Pizan, C. (1405/1999) *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Trans. R. Brown-Grant. London: Penguin.
De Pizan, C. (1405/2005) *The Vision of Christine de Pizan*. Trans. G. McLeod & C.C. Willard. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
De Pizan, C. (1414/2008) *The Book of Peace*. Eds. K. Green, C.J. Mews & J. Pinder. Philadelphia: Penn State University Press.
De Pizan, C. (1403/2017) *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*. Trans. G.L. Smith. Toronto: Iter Press.
Felski, R. (2008) *Uses of Literature*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing.
Kimball, B.A. (1995) *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. College Board.
Kristjánsson, K. & Fowers, B. (2024) Phronesis as Moral Decathlon: Contesting the Redundancy Thesis About Phronesis. *Political Psychology*, 37(2), 279–298.
Lorris, G. de & de Meun, J. (1236–1275/1971) *The Romance of the Rose*. Trans. C. Dahlberg. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
MacIntyre, A. (2007) *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth Press.
Matheolus (1295/1992) Lamentations. In Blamires, A. (Ed.) *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
McLeod, G. (1991) *Virtue and Venom. Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Quilligan, M. (1991) *The Allegory of Female Authority. Christine de Pizan's Cité des Dames*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Semple, B.M. (2018) Teaching the Concept of Virtue in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In Tarnowski, A. (Ed.) *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Christine de Pizan*. New York: Modern Languages Association of America, pp. 109–118.
Titus, C.S. (2006) *Resilience and the Virtue of Fortitude. Aquinas in dialogue with the psychosocial sciences*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.
Willard, C.C. (1984) *Christine de Pizan. Her Life and Works*. New York: Persea Books.
Willard, C.C. (1989) Introduction. In de Pizan, C. (Ed.) & Willard, C.C. (Trans.) *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor. The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. New York: Persea Books.