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Spinning a Rich Tapestry of Changes:

Weaving, Sewing and Spinning Represented in French Female Writing

Emily Cullings '08

Picture a woman working diligently in solitude on a task that requires great patience and skill to produce an object at once useful and beautiful, pragmatic and pleasing. This job requires a thorough knowledge of the methods needed to accomplish it well, and it draws on various materials to obtain its end result.

It is difficult to say if, in the situation described above, this woman is creating a gorgeous garment or a work of literature. Both of these pursuits can be described with the same words. Yet how did one form of female occupation become an expected and often oppressive role, and the other become generally suppressed and regarded as beyond normal feminine activity? Throughout texts written by women in France in the Middle Ages and Renaissance period, the traditional tasks of sewing, weaving and spinning, which are so often the responsibility of wives and daughters, are presented in sometimes conflicting ways. Like the complicated cloth they produced, women of this time struggled to weave their own stories and identities out of the many threads of their traditional and newer images. It is difficult to separate these strands and break completely away from the standards of society at that point in history, so that the values of women and their different roles in this culture must be looked at in terms of both the expectations of others and the ones that they held for themselves.

To women writers who examined their gender and its implications to their

lives, the most notable of this period being the outspoken Christine de Pisan (1364- c.1430), the issue of weaving and garment making had many sides. It was a respectable and honored task for women to perform, and had a sense of familial responsibility and virtue attached to it. However, for women wishing to go beyond traditional roles, often in a non-threatening manner such as expressing themselves through the written word, these types of manual activity stifled and inhibited the intellectual goals they strived to achieve. However, it is interesting to note that the activities are not presented in a negative way in themselves, only being negative in the ways they are imposed on the unwilling. They were just as often praised as one more element to the life experience of being female in those times.

It is interesting to note that among the texts studied, the earliest implicit reference to weaving and its related activities was a poem entitled "Weaving Song" by an anonymous woman living in the twelfth to thirteenth century. It presents an image of a woman in an abusive marriage and repeats the refrain "Alas Count Guy! The cost/ of

loving you is love and laughter lost,” at the end of each stanza (3). Although never mentioning the act of weaving itself, it creates the image of a toiling woman lamenting while she works. The refrain of the poem, occurring in such a pattern, draws the unfortunate woman’s experiences together and makes the act of writing and reciting the verse into a type of weaving in itself. Each new event in the story brings the focus back to her unhappy marriage, creating a pattern in the same way repeating strokes of weaving makes the garment have a unified and focused look. This poem enforces an image of oppression that cannot be truly proven to be connected with the narrator’s work, but sets a tone of displeasure regardless of that fact.

The most interesting and conflicting parallels between the images of weaving, sewing and spinning as commendable and confining come from Christine de Pizan’s overarching tribute to women throughout history and in her own time *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Her story likens two seemingly unrelated actions, that of writing and building an actual city. Through metaphor, she uses her pen and words of argument and encouragement to construct a city “built for every honorable lady” that will be “the defense and guard against enemies and assailants”, referring to those who oppress and slander the female sex (254). This correlation between building and creating through writing can also be tied into the act of spinning and other such tasks. As de Pizan proves, many pieces and strands of a concept can be built up or woven into something impressive and beautiful. Often what results is colorful and unexpected due to the different qualities of what goes into

its creation. De Pizan uses many types of women, virgins and wives, warriors and home-makers, and Christian martyrs and pagans to build up her fortress of virtues. Weaving is an action that can be said to do the same, as it uses many textures and colors to create its desired pattern, and can be used to represent the same process of bringing together the old and the new, as many female writers struggled to accomplish in their literature.

De Pizan’s bringing together of contrasting ideas occurs often with respect to traditional female pursuits. For example, her own mother is often referred to as a force that is in the way of her complete educational freedom, and spinning is implicated in her troubles concerning this matter. The character of Rectitude explains to de Pizan herself, “Your father...did not believe women were worth less by knowing science: rather, as you know, he took great pleasure from seeing your inclination to learning. The feminine opinion of your mother, however, who wished to keep you busy with spinning and silly girlishness, following the common custom of women, was the major obstacle to your being more involved in the sciences” (155). It’s interesting that her mother’s opinion was referred to as being “feminine”, as de Pizan and the other characters of the novel have progressive attitudes and a love of learning yet are still identifying themselves as feminine by developing the solidarity of their gender through the City of Ladies. Spinning is placed in direct opposition to the concept of learning. It is presented by her mother as the alternative, and the only one, to the life of knowledge de Pizan chooses to pursue. In that sense the frustration of the passage can be attributed largely to

the fact that de Pizan is given such a limited amount of choices, as throughout her novel she struggles with the prominent issue that women were all too often given such black-and-white options. The thread she chooses for the story she weaves seeks to remedy this trapped feeling by presenting many different types of women who often don't fall comfortably into one accepted category or the other.

Earlier in the book, de Pizan acknowledges the value of sewing in response to a Latin proverb that undermines women, "God made women to speak, weep and sew" (27). Her approach to disproving this unsettlingly sexist phrase is innovative. Instead of going great lengths to disprove it, she tackles each part of the accusation on its own and shows the merits of women who have engaged in each of these activities. As stated before, her changes are subtle and influential; she supports women rather than inciting them to any type of rebellion. On the subject of sewing, she gives women great respect, "As for sewing, truly has God desired that this be natural for women, for it is an occupation necessary for divine service and the benefit of any reasonable creature. Without this work, the world's estates would be maintained in great chaos. Therefore it is a great wickedness to reproach women for what should be redound to their great credit, honor, and praise" (30). As sewing is the act of bringing together two pieces of cloth, writing can be seen in this context as bringing together the thoughts of de Pizan and those of the people who came before her, both male and female, who are so abundantly cited in her works. In this way, De Pizan seems to instinctually support this act, and is right in this sense that without analysis through the written

word "the world's estates would be maintained in great chaos". Her sewing of ideas makes sense of the collective female experience and brings the gender together in the city she is building.

De Pizan's numerous references to weaving, spinning and sewing in the text seem to continue her support of the common lives of women while gently giving them perspectives into different choices they can make in their lives. For example, she tells the stories of the women who invented techniques commonly used in these practices, implying that rather than being idle and simple tasks that provided the gender with less of a mind for innovation, these arts were developed by women themselves, providing the world with the clothing it so often takes for granted.

For example, de Pizan praises the wise Minerva, a woman who was credited with many innovations, including the creation of a shorthand Greek script, various musical instruments, iron armor, and the technique of preparing and weaving wool. It is surprising to note that the two types of "clothing" she had created, iron armor and wool garments, had by de Pizan's time separated themselves into being distinctly associated with the opposite sexes. De Pizan takes care to remind the reader that a female was responsible for the creation of their signature craft, "Her mind was so enlightened with general knowledge that she devised various skills and designs which had never before been discovered. She developed the entire technique of gathering wool and making cloth and was the first who ever thought to shear sheep of their wool and then to pick, comb and card it with iron spin-invented the tools needed to make the cloth and also the method by which the

wool should finally be woven” (73). In this manner she empowers women to explore their own ideas for invention and take pride in the tasks that they work at. A description that women at the time were very familiar with, that of the process of creating cloth from wool, may have been less intimidating and unknown as a description of the making of iron armor.

With her description of the maiden Arachne, another woman who made great progress in the field of textile creation, de Pizan gives more direct support to these arts and their societal association with females. She praises Arachne with the following, “Thanks to all her reflections she was the first to invent the art of dyeing woollens in various colors and of weaving art works into cloth, like a painter, according to the ‘fine thread’ technique of weaving tapestry. She was marvelously skilled in all kinds of weaving. This woman discovered an even more necessary science...steeping and hackling the flax, spinning it with a distaff, and weaving linen” (81). However, her next observation is a strong show of support for the women involved in this work, “It seems to me that this technique was quite necessary for the world, although many men have reproached women for practicing it (82).” She brings this prejudice to the forefront and soundly rejects it, continuing with the impressive argument, “Nevertheless, several authors...have argued that this world was better off when people...wore nothing more than animal skins than it is now that they have been taught to live in greater refinement...I would maintain the more goods, favors and boons the human creature receives from God, the better he is required to serve God...Jesus Christ himself showed us this is His own

person, for He used...colored robes, and all these things have thus become necessary” (82). Her argument was one of the most convincing she could make in her time, as it drew its proof straight from God, the source of human knowledge. She later commends the art of spinning, weaving and sewing through her summarizing of another biblical source, the Epistle of Solomon or the Book of Proverbs, which describes the virtuous and prudent woman, “She occupies herself with difficult tasks and does not despise feminine tasks but applies herself to them...She makes herself clothes is silk and purple, with honor and fame, and her husband is honored...She makes fabrics and fine linens, which she sells, and her own clothes are strength and honor, and for this reason her joy shall be perpetual (90).” Again, the making of clothes is directly labeled feminine, but this passage presents strong descriptions of the rewards women receive for their labor, “honor and fame” and “perpetual joy”. Although the husband gains profit from her labor, she clearly does as well when “her own clothes are strength and honor”.

This image of the woman’s own clothes brings about another way to approach the correlation between weaving and literature. As women are presented countless times as being the creators of their garments, they are also the creators of another type of garment when they produce works of literature. This “garment” is woven of their emotions, thoughts, personalities and convictions to create the covering they wish to “wear” and thus present to the rest of the world. She later states “Many people, men and women, take delight in...beautiful and rich clothes...” (204) and describes the poems of the famous

woman Sappho as having been, “most remarkably constructed and composed...so well made” (67) much as one weaves cloth according to a particular skill and technique. De Pizan herself clearly constructs her narrative in much the same way women would weave a pattern; she divides her story into three distinct parts which are “woven together” in the end to create a unified image of the city she is building with the rich material she chooses, the inspiring stories of strong women. In this way, de Pizan and many other women of her time and before it were able to embrace and glorify the dedicated work of women through weaving, spinning and sewing, yet at the same time create a pattern of ongoing change that allowed women, through knowledge and writing, to take advantage of the fine resources and talents that they already possessed, just waiting for them to make something gorgeous from them. In the poem “To My Distaff”, the 16th century poet Catherine de Roches expresses this balance of intellect and tradition well when she writes, “Distaff, my care, of your merits I write, / Keeping in hand the spindle and quill (71).”

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