Proto-feminism in the utopian works of Christine de Pizan and Margaret Cavendish

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Abstract: The feminist movement, particularly in the French school of the 1980s and 1990s, has emphasised the necessity for women writers to establish an assertive feminine identity and authority that are not constrained by the masculine hegemonies observed thus far. However, a retrospective examination of literary history reveals that women had already produced remarkable works prior to the emergence of the movement. This study examines two women writers from different historical periods who predated the emergence of feminism as a literary and intellectual movement: Christine de Pizan who wrote during the Middle Ages, and Margaret Cavendish who wrote during the 17th century. The paper suggests that in Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) and Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* (1666), both women have produced proto-feminist properties that explicitly address the reconstruction of women's roles in society and assert their authorial autonomy as female writers, by employing utopian approach.

Keywords: Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Margaret Cavendish, *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World*, feminism

Introduction

The feminist movement has generally been categorised based on its diverse methodologies, geographical locations, and historical eras. Originating from a desire for equitable treatment, the movement has evolved into a quest for personal liberty for women through a combination of intellectual endeavours and political engagement. During the period from the 1980s to the 1990s, the movement also explored psychoanalytic and literary theory with influential figures like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. In an effort to acknowledge the

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contributions of women in a society dominated by male authority, this school of thought has emphasized the need for women to establish their own independent authorial autonomy. The historical and contemporary periods have both seen a noticeable lack of female presence in the field of literature. On the other hand, women have consistently felt the need to convey their thoughts and ideas via writing in literary works. Their objective is not solely to pursue a career as a writer, but also to assert their independence and establish their feminine identity. This necessity to claim a female autonomy through writing is highlighted by the seminal article of Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of Medusa", in which she advocates that

> [w]oman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history- by her own movement. (1976, 875)

In a similar vein with Cixous's approach, the absence of women in literary field has been a topic of interest for various female writers and critics who deal with women's studies. The basic motive behind this absence is generally analysed through the male dominance over female world in political, economic or social arenas. By the same token, when Virginia Woolf writes her famous lines that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (1997, 7), she certainly means that women should be independent of male inflictions upon their personal and professional spheres. Only then, women can return to their true selves and bodies. Likewise, in the early examples of utopian writing, women, as Alessa Johns puts it, "have fared poorly […] where they have been forced to labour endlessly and bow to humourless patriarchs" (2010, 174). Nevertheless, she emphasized the necessity of female contribution to utopian tradition on account of three reasons:

> First, gender equality has never fully existed, so it must be imagined if it is to become a subject of conscious thought and discussion. […]. Second, given the limited political, economic and social clout of feminists, they have sought out cultural modes, especially artistic and literary representations, as the most eligible means of making a different future comprehensible to the largest possible audience. The utopian literary mode, so open to imaginative construction and unhindered theorizing, has therefore always appeared useful to feminist authors. […], Consequently, third, veering from the traditional

> utopia has given feminists a socially viable course of discursive and ideological deviance. (2010, 175)

In a similar vein, there are several outspoken women writers in utopian and dystopian writing who were able to put themselves "into the text" in an attempt to speak within a female tradition and to obtain "a room of [their] own". As Kate Lilley epitomizes, "women's contributions to utopian discourse have manifold claims on feminist attention- political, philosophical, historical, generic, rhetorical" (1992, 101). Female writers, lacking significant power in politics, economics, and society, have resorted to writing, to envision and communicate possible futures for them and all the women. With its inventive qualities, utopian writing provides an effective means for the women writers to create alternative societal, political, or economic worlds. In this light, the aim of this paper is to examine Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*[1] and Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*[2] as regards their shared desire to recreate new worlds for the women where they can secure a female autonomy and capture an authoritative female discourse by writing or/and telling the self.

Christine de Pizan and *The Book of the City of Ladies*

Considering Christine's *City of Ladies*, it is crucial here to mention that Christine wrote during the Middle Ages when a "tradition of literary misogyny or anti-feminism" (Brown-Grant, Introduction, 1999, xvii) pervaded the culture. The religious doctrines that was prevalent in every part of life during the Middle Ages introduced the idea that a woman, Eve, was responsible for the fall. Consequently, there were several misogynist works highlighting the ills and vices of women, like *Roman de la Rose* (13th c.) in which emphasis is placed on the seductive and manipulative attributes of women. Therefore, as in the case of numerous social, political or professional domains, women were excluded from the professional writing freely and were only left with areas restricted within religion, exemplified in the works of Margery Kempe or Julian of Norwich. Considering the predicament of the women writers in the Middle Ages, in her book *Women's Writing in Middle English*, Alexandra Barratt outlines that

[1] Hereafter referred as *City of Ladies*.
[2] Hereafter referred as *Blazing World*.

> [t]he concept of authority (*auctoritas*), in its theological, political and literary senses, was thoroughly male. The supreme and highest auctor (the Latin word from which 'author' ultimately derives), the creator of the universe, the First Cause, was God Himself who in the Middle Ages was indisputably male. (1992, 5)

As noted, the correlation between creative capacity and authority being attributed to males further solidified the male-dominated hierarchy of society and culture, resulting in the marginalisation of women from positions of power and authorship. As a matter of fact, although there was a dominance of men in the literary field, Jean Bethke Elshtain acknowledges that unlike "the women writers of the more recent past, medieval women writers did not use male pseudonyms but identified themselves by name and sex" (1992, 5). This was achievable for women because they made the deliberate choice to write within the confines of modesty *topos* tradition where they negated their authorities as a woman. This enabled them to write and publish safely in the male-dominant literary world. There were few women who could find the opportunity to write in the Middle Ages. However, among them Christine was the pioneer in making a livelihood merely through her writing. Although she produced many works from a wide range of literary genres, she is mostly "known for her opposition to the misogynistic views that were widespread and accepted in the Middle Ages" (Erol 1996, 79) in a male-dominated profession.

The City of Ladies is Christine de Pizan's most well-known work. It was first translated into English in 1521. Although it was neglected for a long while, it had a substantial impact on French writers, such as Martin Le Franc. It provided the subject matter for a series of tapestries, as well, which are lost today (Brown-Grant, *The Moral Defense*, 1999, 129). In the text, Christine utilizes various traditions that she borrows from medieval literature, the most noteworthy of which are allegory and dream-vision traditions. She also conflates the traditions of frame tale narratives, allegory, and historical works. Furthermore, Christine features herself as a fictional character in her book. The text opens with Christine sitting in her study. In that room, while reading *Lamentations* by Matheolus, which is "a thirteenth century tirade against marriage in which the author vilifies women for making men's lives a misery" (Brown-Grant, Introduction, 1999, xvii), Christine is appalled by the approach of male writers towards women in general. Upon her readings, she wonders

> 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. I was at a loss as to how to explain it. […]. It is all manner of philosophers, poets and orators too numerous to mention, who all seem to speak with one voice and are unanimous in their view that female nature is wholly given up to vice. (Pizan 1405[3] , 6)

Lady Reason arrives and informs her that along with Rectitude and Justice, they have come to "help [her] get rid of those misconceptions which have clouded [her] mind" (Pizan 1405, 8). She emphasizes that God Himself has sent them to establish order and justice. So as to protect the female sex that "has been left defenceless for a long time now" (Pizan 1405, 11), Christine is charged with the construction of a city that is fully inhabited by women. This construction requires a systematic method of disproving any sexist accusations made against women. This city will only admit women who are virtuous and deserving. Thus, step by step, Reason helps her lay the foundations of the city during which soldierly courageous women from history are mentioned. Secondly, Rectitude takes over and helps her build walls and rooms while historical women's stories on chastity, devotion, and familial matters are apprised. Lastly, Justice gives the city its finishing touches during which the stories of holy and martyred women are mentioned. Even Virgin Mary comes and celebrates the city:

> Justice, my son's dearly beloved, I will gladly come to live amongst these women, who are my sisters and friends, and I will take my place at their side. This is because Reason, Rectitude, you Justice and even Nature, have all persuaded me to do so. Women serve, honour and praise me without end, thus I am now and ever shall be the head of the female sex. God Himself always wished this to be so and it was predestined and ordained by the Holy Trinity. (Pizan 1405, 202)

It is obvious that not the Eve tradition, which connotes the vices of women, but Virgin Mary tradition, which pertains to the favourable characteristics of women, is in the foreground in Christine's work. The Virgin becomes the power figure, and Christine aptly uses it both as a writer and as a woman. In the same vein, she endeavours to reverse the perspective on women and the masculine writing tradition that contributes to it in her work. To that aim, by employing examples of distinctive women, she intends to prove that the female sex has played

[3] I prefer employing the original publication date of both works.

a critical role in human civilisation in terms of art, politics, and spirituality.

The three heroines mention several women from history who have been helpful in creating an autonomous female identity. These figures range from empresses, queens, princesses, the Amazons, to poet Sappho and wives of Socrates and Seneca. Through these examples, not only the important roles women possess as mothers, wives, and daughters are recognized but also their roles are joined with examples of women who "govern prudently, fight courageously, and enrich their civilizations through the arts and sciences" (Brabant et al. 1992, 217). Refashioning these stories in her own way, Christine intends to create novel interpretations to them in an effort to promote female autonomy. For example, she mentions the Iliad war from a divergent vantage point. Lady Reason illuminates the Trojans' assistance from the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, in contrast to the predominantly masculine perspectives on the war that male writers present through dominant male characters. As a result, what women can accomplish in every field of life is valued and praised from solid examples from history. Refutation towards the male-dominant approach is key to Christine's discussion and throughout the construction of her city, she employs the Socratic dialectic in her pursuit of turning around the philosophical and religious reasons that reject women, as well as the male writing tradition that supports it. A continuous question and answer process takes place during which the supposed superiority of men is re-examined. Christine succeeds in altering the power dynamics between men and women by highlighting that they are equal human beings created by God:

> Something which is done with the aim of privileging only one section of the population is called a private or an individual good, not a common good. Moreover, something which is done for the good of some but to the detriment of others is not simply a private or an individual good. In fact, it constitutes a type of injury done to one party in order to benefit the other: it does only profits [sic] the second party at the expense of the first. […]. Besides, it's beyond doubt that women count as God's creatures and are human beings just as men are. They're not a different race or a strange breed, […]. I can thus only conclude that if these authors were really writing for the common good, they would warn women against the snares set by men. (Pizan 1405, 172)

Throughout the text, Christine aims to demonstrate that women are equivalent to males in all facets of life. Therefore, it appears that she

foresees several of the fundamental principles that will shape the feminist movement, particularly its approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, which basically dealt with the necessity of the female authorial self. By shattering the authority of male discourse, she can speak her own self-assertive voice and address to all women to speak for themselves at the end of the text:

> Most honourable ladies, praise be to God: the construction of our city is finally at an end. All of you who love virtue, glory and a fine reputation can now be lodged in great splendour inside its walls, not just women of the past but also those of the present and the future, for this city has been founded and built to accommodate all deserving women. (Pizan 1405, 237)

By inadvertently incorporating the principles of the imminent feminist movement, the text addresses the issue of the misinterpreted roles of women by offering alternative interpretations of them from history. Christine includes women in the body politics and thus "feminiz[es]" it (Green 2005, xv). The focal point Christine adopts throughout her text has been that both genders are capable of comprehending matters concerning virtue and reason and they are not exclusively granted upon the male sex. By rewriting multiple women's stories from her own unique point of view, Christine honours a self-aware female contribution and authority. She draws attention to and celebrates the contributions that women have made in a variety of disciplines, recognising their accomplishments by drawing on past precedents. This reinterpretation pays tribute to the achievements of women.

Margaret Cavendish and *The Blazing World*

Margaret Cavendish is recognised for her works on natural philosophy. She was a member of the Newcastle Circle which included several scientists of the time. She produced essays, plays, poems, and orations and she effectively combined the subjects of the new science in these works (Sarasohn 2017, 290). Her fiction combines philosophy, satire, and romance in an inventive narrative with links to utopia, the imaginary voyage, philosophical dialogue, autobiography, political allegory, and science fiction (Dodds 2013, 123). She produced poems on atoms in "The Atomic Poems" in *Poems and Fancies* (1635), her biography entitled *A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding, and Life* (1656), her husband's biography *The Life of William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle* (1667), *Sociable Letters* (1664), *Philosophical Fancies* (1653), *The World's Olio* (1655), and *The Forced Marriage* (1670).

She addresses the natural philosophy and science of her own fancy, as well as familial matters, in her works.

Blazing World was published in 1666 as a companion book to *Observations on Experimental Philosophy* and thus Cavendish made history as the first British lady to author and publish a scientific work (Iyengar 2002, 649). In creating her *Blazing World*, she "uses the voyage convention to imagine a better way of life and an alternative society" (Pearl 2014, 43) which would benefit women. Cavendish uses these recurrent motifs of utopian writing such as the voyage motif and creating an ideal land where people live in peace. The story begins with a lady who is kidnapped by a merchant. The man dies with his crew during a tempest in the North Pole and the lady only remains alive. While all the men are "frozen to death", the lady remains alive "by the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth, and protection of gods" (Cavendish 1666, 126). The distressed lady finds herself in "another Pole of another world" (Ibid.). After several travels, she arrives in Blazing World where she is presented to the Emperor. As soon as she is presented, the Emperor conceives "her to be some goddess and offer[s] to worship her" (Cavendish 1666, 132). He gives her "an absolute power to rule and govern all that world as she pleased" (Ibid.). With the absolute power she is bestowed, she creates scientific, religious and educational institutions. She employs the anthropomorphic creatures according to their own natural inclinations to help her govern. The bear-men are "her experimental philosophers, the bird-men her astronomers, the fly-, worm- and fish-men her natural philosophers, the ape-men her chemists, the satyrs her Galenic physicians, the fox-men her chemists, the spider- and lice-men her mathematicians" (Cavendish 1666, 134).

The Empress has so much power and authority that she even resolves to compose her own Cabbala. She is required to find a scribe for her book and consults the immaterial spirits who advise her the soul of Margaret Cavendish, the writer. According to the text, Cavendish the writer is not "the most learned, eloquent, witty and ingenious, yet is she a plain and rational writer" (Cavendish 1666, 181). Furthermore, the Empress makes an astral voyage to the King's land and becomes a peace maker there. Here, she walks over water which is depicted like "a kind of female Christ" (Seber 2008, 93). Cavendish's imagination enables her to achieve much more than reality or probability. The most noteworthy aspect is that she is the absolute authority through all the scientific, political, and religious

developments that are executed in this utopic land. Cavendish clearly fancies the absolute authority she has both as a writer and a character in the work and refashions her world through the eyes of an aspirant woman. In "To the Reader" section, she emphasizes that she considers herself to be a "creatoress" (Cavendish 1666, 124) of her work. So as to obtain an authorial autonomy, her motivation to create is apparent as she declares:

> I am not covetous, but as ambitious as ever any of my sex was, is, or can be; which makes, that though I cannot be Henry the Fifth, or Charles the Second, yet I endeavour to be Margaret the First; and although I have neither power, time, not occasion to conquer the world as Alexander and Caesar did; yet rather than not be mistress of one, since Fortune and Fates would give me none, I have made a world of my own; for which nobody, I hope, will blame me, since it is in everyone's power to do the like. (Cavendish 1666, 124)

Cavendish's aspiration to become a creator (as an author and/or a female leader) is vividly articulated in this context. Given the fact that women are often overlooked in daily life, the Empress character interrogates this deficiency: "But what is the reason, you bar them from your religious assemblies? It is not fit, said they" (Cavendish 1666, 135). In response to this deficit, in a similar vein with Christine who constructs an allegorical city to which virtuous and noble women are allowed, the Empress constructs two towers which symbolize Heaven and Hell and only women are allowed to visit there:

> […] she considered by herself the manner of their religion, and finding it very defective, was troubled, […] wherefore she consulted with her own thoughts, whether it was possible to convert them all to her own religion, and to that end she resolved to build churches, and make also up a congregation of women, whereof she intended to be the head herself, and to instruct them in several points of her religion. This she had no sooner begun, but the women, which generally had quick wits, subtle conceptions, clear understandings, and solid judgements, became, in a short time very devout and zealous sisters. (Cavendish 1666, 162)

Through the inclusion of a character who possesses authority of both politics and religion, Cavendish, as Seber encapsulates,

> presents all her desires fulfilled: as a Royalist, she celebrates monarchy as the best form of government, she then experiences the ultimate power of a female monarch, adored and respected for her intelligence and even worshiped for her beauty, actively participates in the world of science, lives through the idealized projections of marriage and friendship, enjoys a freedom that both

> her body and soul experiences, and ultimately becomes the authoress of the whole world she created. (2008, 87)

While Christine aims to shatter the misconceptions of women created by men by reinterpreting the stories of women from history, Cavendish accomplishes it by subverting the "romance exploit" and thus "figuring a progressive woman who makes a masculine utopia her own" (Holmesland 2013, 86). Cavendish applies her own understanding of natural philosophy and science into her own text. The text is therefore replete with the scientific, philosophical, and religious perspectives of the Empress during her creation process, with a particular emphasis on the female strength required to accomplish this. There is the dominance of women in every aspect of life in her fictional world whereas in real life women lack this wide range of liberty. Thus, Cavendish continuously reconstructs her fresh reality by using the unlimited power of her imagination in order to create and ideal world.

In her article "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking", Alicia Ostriker poignantly emphasizes: "Women writers have always tried to steal the language. […], throughout most of her history, the woman writer has had to state her self-definitions" (Ostriker 1992, 69). Likewise, both Christine de Pizan and Margaret Cavendish take shelter in the power of the words which have long been the domain of male discourses and aim to establish their female authority.

Conclusion

Christine de Pizan and Margaret Cavendish both employ the future ideas prompted by Feminism in their endeavour to subvert male hegemony in the literary arena long before the advent of the movement. Feminism encourages female writers to write their own selves in order to achieve authorial autonomy. It is exceptional that both writers accomplish it in settings that render it challenging for women to gain publication rights. In Christine's case, she had to dig into the stories of historical women and redefine them to lose the misconceptions about women. Margaret Cavendish, on the other hand, refashions a world of her own in which her female character is the ultimate authoritative figure. The shared characteristic of both is that they undergo a process of refutation and reconstruction in order to achieve this authorial autonomy.

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