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# WHEN AUDRE MET CHRISTINE: MODELLING ACADEMIC DIALOGUE FOR HUMANITIES STUDENTS

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**YVONNE SEALE, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK-GENESEO**

## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

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This "toolbox" offering presents an exercise in which I encouraged students to develop their ability to make nuanced, active connections across texts. When first introduced to the concept of "academic debate" in a humanities subject, students tend to assume that "debate" is a simple synonym for "argument", that the goal of academic debate is to identify which side is right and which wrong, and that academic debates have clear winners and losers. This is understandable. Much training in formal writing and rhetoric—particularly in my home discipline of history—focuses on modelling how to build an "objective" argument which seeks to persuade the reader of its correctness. In learning how to write in this mode, students often default to simple binaries of right and wrong, rather than more holistically engaging with the topic or problem at hand.

Equally, students can struggle with learning not to take a text at face value, whether in print or online.<sup>1</sup> Where an instructor might assign a reading because it represented a milestone in the field but has since been superseded, or because its methodology is interesting even if its conclusions are flawed, students tend to see the reading's presence on the syllabus as an absolute imprimatur for its truth and accuracy.

In both instances, students are generally adopting stances which echo those of the primary or secondary sources they have read. This may demonstrate their possession of a basic level of reading comprehension, but it does not show student ability to think independently or creatively.

In the assignment discussed below, I offered students a space to engage with these issues by having them place two assigned texts in conversation with one another—texts which were loosely on the same topic—and in so doing critically reflect on their relationship with the texts we were reading. I hoped that this would help them to think seriously about what is involved in an

## BACKGROUND

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I used this exercise during a class session in the course "Western Humanities I", the first of a two-part Great Books course offered at SUNY Geneseo, a public liberal arts college in western New York.<sup>2</sup> On

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<sup>1</sup> For a study of undergraduate students' ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of online information, see Sarah McGrew, Mark Smith, Joel Breakstone, Teresa Ortega, and Sam Wineburg, "Improving university students' web savvy: An intervention study", *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 89, no. 3 (April 2019), 485-500.

<sup>2</sup> Students at Geneseo must take at least one part of this course (Western Humanities I (antiquity to 1600) or Western Humanities II (1600 to present)) in order to graduate. Prior to the Fall 2017 semester, students were required to take

average, the course has an enrolment of 35-40 students, most of whom are sophomores or juniors.<sup>3</sup> Since it is a general education course, it enrolls students from a variety of different majors. On the last occasion that I taught the course during the Spring 2021 semester, a plurality of the 35 students enrolled were either business administration, education, or communications majors, or were undeclared. A number of different faculty from across several departments teach Western Humanities courses on a regular basis. As a historian who specializes in the history of women during the Middle Ages, in my iteration of the course I try to bring in the voices of those, both past and present, who are often omitted from the Great Books approach to the past.<sup>4</sup> While I do not have the freedom to change the core of the syllabus—certain texts considered canonical, such as the Christian New Testament, Plato, and Shakespeare must be taught—the additions that I can make to the student reading list and how I frame those core readings seem to me key in making the course a successful one.<sup>5</sup>

This makes Christine de Pizan (ca. 1365-1431) an ideal figure to include on a Western Humanities I course syllabus. Christine was an Italian-born French author whose prolific output across a variety of genres has received increasing attention from both scholars and feminist activists since the 1970s, particularly for her perceived proto-feminism.<sup>6</sup> Her *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (Book of the City of Ladies), written in the first few years of the fifteenth century, is probably her most famous work.<sup>7</sup> In it, Christine sought to rebut the misogyny of much contemporary literature by envisioning a metaphorical city populated by heroic women from the past—biblical figures, Christian saints, historical queens, and more—who were capable of defending other women against attack. Christine's outspoken refutation of misogynistic discourse generally comes as a surprise to students, who assume that women in the European Middle Ages were universally passive and voiceless.<sup>8</sup>

Born a little more than five centuries after Christine's death, Audre Lorde (1934-1992) was an American writer and civil rights activist whose advocacy against homophobia and racism was informed by her identity as a Black lesbian. Some of her most influential writings are brought together in the essay

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both parts to graduate. The college defines these courses as "in the humanistic transition emphasizing the search for moral, social, and political alternatives and meaning as embodied in the institutions, culture, and literature of Western Civilization." "Humanities(H/) and Western Civilization(W/)", SUNY Geneseo, accessed June 11, 2021, [https://www.geneseo.edu/gened/LOC\\_humn](https://www.geneseo.edu/gened/LOC_humn).

<sup>3</sup> In Fall 2020, the college had 4,893 degree-seeking students, 64% of whom were female and 36% male. Approximately 21% are students of colour. All statistics provided by SUNY Geneseo's Office of Institutional Research.

<sup>4</sup> On the emergence of the Great Books (self-)pedagogical approach in the United States in the 1920s-30s onwards, see Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). On the origins of the terms "Western Civilization" and "western culture", see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "There is no such thing as western civilization," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture>.

<sup>5</sup> Casey N. Blake, Roosevelt Montás and Tamara Mann Tweel, "Democratizing the Great Books", *Inside Higher Ed*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/04/03/all-students-including-underserved-populations-should-be-taught-great-books-essay>.

<sup>6</sup> In keeping with the convention among historians of pre-modern Europe, I will refer to Christine throughout by her given name. "De Pizan" (or "da Pizzano" in Italian) is an indicator of birthplace, not a surname. For an overview of Christine de Pizan's career and the recent scholarship on her, see Tracy Adams, "Christine de Pizan," *French Studies* 71, no. 3 (July 2017): 388-400.

<sup>7</sup> Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> This was far from the case. For a brief discussion of elite women's political roles in the Middle Ages, see Katrin E. Sjørusen, "What the Middle Ages Show About Women Leaders," *The Atlantic*, February 8, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/are-women-leaders-hawks-or-doves-a-lesson-on-gender-equality-from-the-middle-ages/460386/>.

collection *Sister Outsider* (1984). It includes perhaps her well-known—and certainly most Instagrammed—essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."<sup>9</sup>

Christine and Lorde often appear together in introductory collections of feminist writings, their writings considered key for anyone new to feminist theory to grapple with.<sup>10</sup> However, their work is rarely placed in direct conversation—perhaps unsurprisingly given the gulf of time and space which separates their respective lives. Yet contrasting the thought of these women is an effective way of showing students just how such differences of perspective shape the writing which they produced. Christine was raised at the French royal court, wrote for an aristocratic audience, and concentrated largely on elite women in her work.<sup>11</sup> Lorde, however, rejected elitism, working for the recognition of the voices and concerns of women of color, working-class and poor women, lesbian, queer women, and more within the feminist movement. She argued that feminists "must recognize difference among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior" and thereby "identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across differences."<sup>12</sup> I chose to place these works in apposition to one another in large part because of those very differences. Both Christine and Lorde would likely have understood their work as being in defense of women, and both used metaphors about building and demolition to make a point—but their motivations, their understanding of which women needed defense, and their ultimate goals, were just as likely to have been very different. Sharing an identity category—in this case that of 'woman'—does not mean that Christine and Lorde thought the same way.

## ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

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In preparation for this activity—which occupied most of one 100-minute class session—the students read *City of Ladies*, while I brought some colored markers and some easel pads to the classroom with me. Each sheet on these pads is oversized (25 x 30 in/63.5 x 76.2 cm) with adhesive backing, which enables small groups to write or diagram collaboratively together with ease. I placed students into groups of four or five and gave each group some sheets and markers. I then asked them to spend fifteen to twenty minutes working together to show, through text or diagram, what they thought:

- Christine's goal had been in writing *City of Ladies*
- What methods Christine had used to meet that goal
- Whether they thought *City of Ladies* was a feminist work

Once they were done, each group affixed its sheets to the classroom wall, creating a gallery wall of their peers' work which they could then examine quietly for five minutes or so. This allowed students to gain a broad sense of their peers' responses—identifying common points and major disagreements—while giving them space to think through them. It also gave us a jumping off point for a subsequent, class-wide conversation about feminism, authorial voice, and history. Most of the students thought that *City of Ladies* was a feminist text, for reasons ranging from "Christine was a woman" to "Christine was advocating for women not to be oppressed." (The minority who thought that *City of Ladies* was not a feminist text

<sup>9</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984; New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 101-103. Citations refer to the Penguin Books edition.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Estelle Freedman, ed., *The Essential Feminist Reader* (New York: Random House, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> The most notable exception to this general rule is Christine's very last work, *Le Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc* ("The Tale/Song of Joan of Arc"), written shortly before her death. The eponymous saint was born into a peasant family. Christine de Pizan, *The Song of Joan of Arc*, trans. Leah Shopkow, <https://dmdhist.sitehost.iu.edu/joan.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 113.

generally did so on the grounds that "feminist" was an anachronistic term to apply to the fifteenth century.)

I then briefly explained to students who Audre Lorde was, and asked them to read for the first time an excerpt from her writings, centering on this famous quotation:

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.<sup>13</sup>

I then distributed a new set of sheets to each group and asked them to work together for fifteen minutes to assess:

- What they thought Lorde meant by this statement.
- Whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

Students struggled somewhat with understanding Lorde's sentiment. Based on Lorde's use of the word "master" and the fact that she was a Black woman, several of the students assumed that she was writing about chattel slavery. However, roughly half of them were able to identify the crux of Lorde's point: that an oppression cannot be disrupted using the same logic or modes that created that oppression in the first place. All the students agreed that Lorde was a feminist, particularly given her self-identification using the term, although they were far more hesitant—especially the men—about deciding whether they personally agreed or disagreed with her statement.

Then I asked students to place their analyses of Christine and Lorde's work side-by-side, and to annotate their group's sheets—with written comments, diagrams, highlighting, or whatever else seemed best to them—to make connections between the two women's writings. I reminded them that their majority decision had been that both were feminist thinkers—but were they feminist in the same way? Would Christine agree with Lorde, or vice versa, and why or why not? What "tools" did Christine use to build her city? Would Lorde have wanted to live in Christine's city? Why or why not? Students were able to identify that Christine's focus on elite women, her overt Christianity, and her own position as a white woman with access to the French royal court, resulted in her having a very different take on what social change was desirable or even possible than had Lorde as the Black daughter of immigrants in the twentieth-century United States. Students were also able to begin textual conversations with one another through their annotations. One student, R.S., wrote that many women in the Middle Ages couldn't "fathom another way of life [...] so why should they try to fix it?" Another student, H.M., drew a line between this comment and his observation about how enslaved Black people in the United States had used self-reliance and mutual aid to resist their enslavers, and another between it and the comment of M.M. that Lorde's statement was "very subjective as it can relate to any circumstance where there is a potential hierarchy." The ensuing conversation, which rounded out the class session, ranged from feminism to the role of inspirational leaders in civil rights movements to individual career aspirations, and was largely directed by the students themselves.

## CONCLUSION

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This exercise gave students a place to practice entering into dialogue with previous scholars, while making it more difficult for them to default to less challenging modes of engagement with texts. When reading

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<sup>13</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 102.

*The City of Ladies* and "The Master's Tools" with an eye for what they have to teach us in the present moment, it is generally easy for students to register and agree with ideas that "women are capable of exercising power" or "racism is bad." It is more difficult for them to engage with the complexities of a text, its strengths and its weaknesses, and to use that engagement to better understand the foundations of their own thinking. This is particularly the case when students encounter texts whose very inclusion on a "canonical" syllabus created by a university professor seems to grant them an imprimatur of infallibility. Using an exercise like this, one centered around juxtapositions that make for productive discomfort, helps students begin to develop a mindset that is more exploratory than it is focused on identifying a single correct answer. Students should finish a course like Western Humanities feeling less like they should know which questions can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no", and more that they are now in possession of a set of new and more complex questions to ask.

In an end-of-semester reflection, student K.D. wrote that she had found the course difficult at times because it had asked her to think about issues that

didn't always have a simple or straightforward answer [...] I do not have a lot of experience with these 'deeper questions.' I wish I could say that throughout the semester our discussions got easier, but I can't because each discussion was so different and I was always faced with a new challenge that wasn't just 'right' or 'wrong.'

Through having Audre meet Christine, students could begin to learn that the Western Humanities syllabus should not be best thought of as a fixed and inert body of dogmas setting out the unchanging principles of "civilization", but rather a toolkit with which they themselves can build—or dismantle.

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