



Christine de Pisan, *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, folio 100r. Christine is shown writing the book in her study.

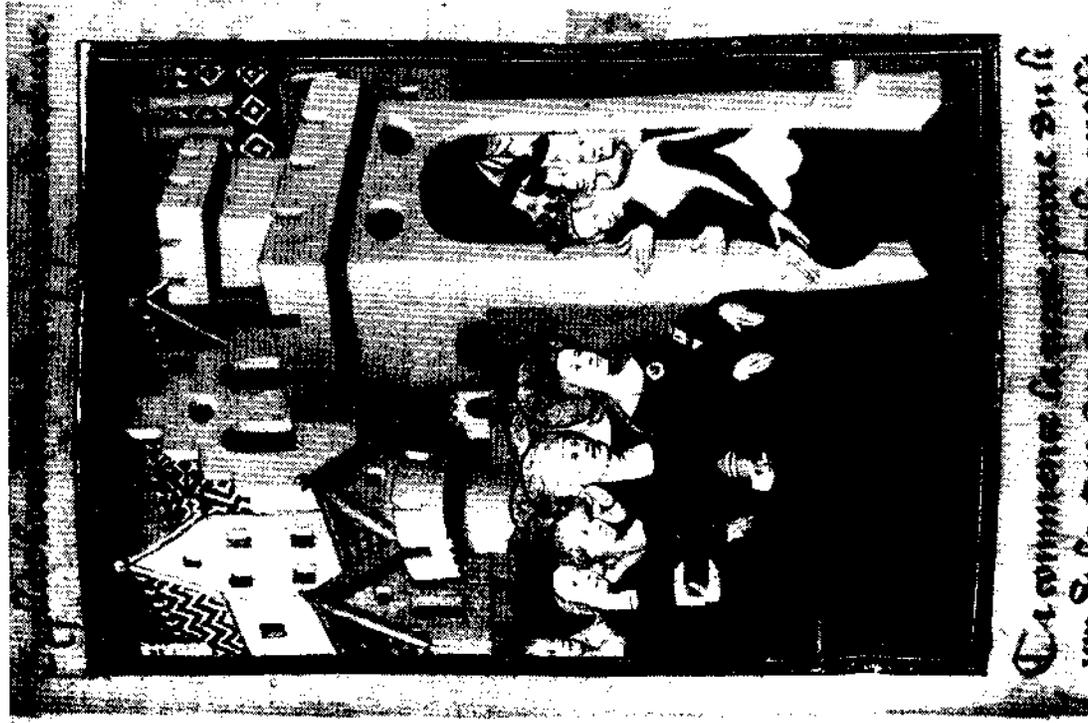
This manuscript was put together by Christine for the French queen Isabeau of Bavaria, John, duke of Bedford, who was then the regent of France, acquired it toward the end of the Hundred Years' War (between 1425 and 1430), and thus it began its lengthy journey to Edward Harley in England, whose wife brought it into his famous collection in 1713. The opening miniature of *The Book of the City of Ladies* shows Christine welcoming the three allegorical ladies, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, in her study on the left. Each holds her attribute: Reason a mirror, Rectitude a ruler, and Justice a golden measuring vessel. On the right, Christine begins the construction of the city with the help of Lady Reason. London, British Library Harley 4431, folio 290.

FROM THE BOOK OF THE CITY OF LADIES

[*The Book of the City of Ladies* responds to Christine's complaint in the *God of Love's Letter* that women had not written books about themselves and were, therefore, represented unfairly over many centuries. As Christine pursues books in her own library, she becomes painfully aware of the bad treatment women had experienced at the hands of the authors and even begins to believe them.¹ At this point three allegorical ladies, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, appear to her and make her realize her error: she will now be charged with establishing a new written tradition of women by building the City of Ladies, where the debris that needs to be cleared from the building site stands for the writings of the antifeminists, where every stone is a celebrated woman of learned or military achievement, and where the inhabitants are women of impeccable virtue.

Within the polemical framework of refuting the misogynistic tradition,

1. It is remarkable how the opening scene of reading misogynistic authors recalls Virginia Woolf's foray into the British Library in search of writings about women—which are all by men. See *A Room of One's Own*, especially chaps. 1 and 2.



Lady Justice welcomes the Virgin Mary, who leads the procession of the saints into the completed City of Ladies. London, British Library Harley 4431, folio 361.

Christine works as a compiler of exemplary stories whose function it is to give counterexamples to all the reproaches leveled against women by male authors. One model may have been Jean Le Fèvre de Resnon's *Livre de l'essee* [Book of Joy], written in the 1370s, designed to celebrate women and

defend them against the misogynist attacks of Matheolus,² the very author who upset Christine at the beginning of the *City of Ladies*. Most of the stories come from Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, translated into French in 1401. Christine also translated a number of stories from the *Decameron*.³ For Boccaccio, famous women were women of some achievement but not necessarily virtuous, and he certainly dwells on the crimes of Medea and the notoriety of Cleopatra. He also states that saintly women have no place in his text, since they should not be in the company of pagan women and since there are special texts devoted to them. But Christine, like Jean Le Fèvre, includes female saints and devotes her whole book 3 to them. Her source was the *Speculum historiale* (Historical mirror) by Vincent of Beauvais⁴ in the French translation made by Jean de Vignay in the late 1320s.

Women's achievements as depicted in books 1 and 2 cover all areas of learning: science, poetry, painting, agriculture, and military arts; some are even prophets. Their deeds illustrate the virtues of filial piety, devoted motherhood, marital love, chastity, constancy, and honesty. The saints of book 3 are almost all martyrs and thus are exemplars of these same virtues in a religious context.⁵

Christine's mission has been accomplished at the end of the *City of Ladies*: women now have a strong and durable refuge against slander. They will be recognized for their true worth, and their history will finally take its place alongside that of men.

In Christine's own time, the *City of Ladies* was not her most successful work, since it was often considered to be a mere translation of Boccaccio. And while a Flemish translation was made in 1475 and the first English version was printed in 1521,⁶ it was not really rediscovered until the 1980s. Today, the *City of Ladies* is Christine's most frequently read text because it speaks to our modern concerns of recognizing and celebrating women's contributions throughout history.

Translated by Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski from Maureen Curnow, "The 'Livre de la Cité des dames' of Christine de Pisan: A Critical Edition," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975). For easy reference, the paragraphs have been numbered as in the Curnow edition.]

2. Ed. A.-C. van Hanel *Les Lamentations de Matheolus et Le Livre de l'esceur de Jehan Le Fèvre de Reims*, 2 vols. (Paris: Emile Bouillon, 1892-1905). On Matheolus, see Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wicked Wives and the Woes of Marriage: Misogynous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 139-42. Excerpts are translated in Alcuin Blamires, ed., *Women Defamed and Women Defended* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1992), 177-97.
3. Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido Quarino (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), and *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1972).
4. Vincent of Beauvais, *Mirror historial*, trans. Jean de Vignay (Paris: Verdard, 1493-96). The Latin text was finished around 1258.
5. See R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Femme de corps et femme par sens: Christine de Pisan's 'Sainly Women,'" *Romanic Review* 57 (1996), 157-75.
6. See Curnow's edition, 300-45.

Here Begins the Book of the City of Ladies, the First Chapter of Which Tells Why and for What Reason This Book Was Made

These are my habits and the way I spend my life: studying literature. One day, doing just that, I was sitting in my study surrounded by several volumes on a variety of topics; at that moment my mind was occupied with the weighty opinions of various authors that I had studied for a long time. I looked up from my book, wondering whether I should leave alone for now these subtle problems and enjoy myself by looking at some cheerful poetry. And as I was looking around for some small book of that kind, I came across a strange book that did not belong to me but which had been given to me for safekeeping. When I opened it I saw on the title page that it was by Matheolus.¹ Then I smiled, for although I had never seen it, I had heard people say that it, like other books, spoke well and with reverence of women, and so I thought that I would take a look at it to enjoy myself. But I had looked at it only for a moment when my good mother called me to supper—for it was that time already—and I put down the book with the intention of looking at it the next day.

The next morning, again sitting in my study as usual, I did not forget that I had wanted to look at this book by Matheolus; so I began reading it and made a little progress. But since the subject matter did not seem very agreeable to people who do not enjoy slander, and since it did not contribute anything to the building up of virtue or good manners, in view of its dishonest themes and subject, I read a little bit here and there and looked at the end, and then put it down in order to devote myself to the study of higher and more useful things. But the sight of this book, although it was of no authority, made me think along new lines which made me wonder about the reasons why so many different men, learned and nonlearned, have been and are so ready to say and write in their treatises so many evil and reproachful things about women and their behavior. And not just one or two, and not just this Matheolus, who has no particular reputation and writes in a mocking manner, but more generally it seems that in all treatises philosophers, poets, and orators, whose names it would take too long to enumerate, all speak with the same mouth and all arrive at the same conclusion: that women's ways are inclined to and full of all possible vices.

Thinking these things over very deeply, I began to examine myself and my behavior as a natural woman, and likewise I thought about other women that I see frequently, princesses, great ladies as well as a great many ladies of the middle and lower classes who were gracious enough to tell me their private and hidden thoughts. From all this I hoped that

1. *The Lamentations of Matheolus*, written in the late thirteenth century. It was edited together with its retitulation *Le Livre de l'esceur* [The Book of joy] by Jean Le Fèvre. See also n. 2, p. 118.

I could judge in my conscience, without prejudice, whether these things, to which so many notable men bear witness, could be true. But according to everything I could know about this problem, however I looked at it and peeled away its various layers, it was clear to me that these judgments did not square with the natural behavior and ways of women. Nevertheless, I argued strongly against women, saying that it would be unlikely that so many famous men, such as solemn scholars of such vast understanding, so clear-sighted in all things as these men seemed to be, could have lied in so many places that I could hardly find a book on morals, no matter who was its author, in which, even before finishing it, I would not find some chapters or certain sections speaking ill of women. This reason alone, in short, made me conclude that, although my intellect in its simplicity and ignorance did not recognize the great defects in myself and in other women, it must nonetheless be so. And thus I relied more on the judgment of others than on what I myself felt and knew.

I was so deeply and for such a long time transfixed by this thought that I seemed to be in a trance; and a large number of authors on this subject passed through my mind, one after the other, just like a gushing fountain. And eventually I concluded that God made a vile thing when He formed woman, wondering how such a worthy artisan could have stooped to making such an abominable piece of work which is the vessel, as they say, as well as the hiding-place and shelter of every evil and vice. As I was thinking this, a great unhappiness and sadness rose up in my heart, and I despised myself and the entire feminine sex, just as if it were a monstrosity in nature. And in my grief I spoke the following words:

"Oh, God, how can this be? For lest I be mistaken in my faith, I am not allowed to doubt that Your infinite wisdom and perfect goodness created anything that is not good. Did not You Yourself form woman in a very singular way, and did You not give her all those inclinations which it pleased You she should have? And how could it be that You should have erred in anything? And nevertheless, here are all the great accusations against them, all judged, determined, and concluded. I cannot understand this hostility. And if this is so, dear Lord God, that it is true that all these abominations abound in the feminine sex—as so many testify—and if You Yourself say that the testimony of more than one witness should be believed, why should I doubt that this is true? Alas, God, why did You not let me be born into this world as a man, so that I would be inclined to serve you better and so that I would not err in anything and be of such perfection as man is said to be? But since Your kindness does not extend to me, forgive my negligence in Your service, good Lord God, and let it not displease You: for the servant who receives fewer gifts from his lord is less obliged to be of service to him."

In my grief I spoke these words and many more to God for a very long time, and in my folly I behaved as if I should be most unhappy because God had made me exist in this world in a female body.

Here Christine Tells How Three Ladies Appeared to Her, and How the One Who Was in Front Addressed Her First and Comforted Her in Her Unhappiness

Lost in these painful thoughts, my head bowed in shame, my eyes full of tears, my hand supporting my cheek and my elbow on theommel of my chair's armrest, I suddenly saw a ray of light descending onto my lap as if it were the sun.² And as I was sitting in a dark place where the sun could not shine at this hour, I was startled as if awakened from sleep. And as I lifted my head to see where this light was coming from, I saw standing before me three crowned ladies of great nobility. The light coming from their bright faces illuminated me and the whole room. Now, no one would ask whether I was surprised, given that my doors were closed, and nevertheless they had come here. Wondering whether some phantom had come to tempt me, in my fright I made the sign of the cross on my forehead.

Then the first of the three began to address me as follows: "Dear daughter, do not be afraid, for we have not come to bother or to trouble you but rather to comfort you, having taken pity on your distress, and to move you out of the ignorance that blinds your own intelligence so that you reject what you know for certain and believe what you do not know, see, and recognize except through a variety of strange opinions. You resemble the fool in that funny story who was dressed in a woman's dress while he slept in a mill. When he woke up those who made fun of him told him that he was a woman and he believed their lies more readily than the certainty of his own being."³

"Fair daughter, what has happened to your good sense? Have you forgotten that when fine gold is tested in the furnace, it does not change or vary in strength, but rather gets purer the more it is hammered and handled in various ways? Do you not know that the best things are those that are most debated and argued about? If you just look at the highest things, which are ideas and celestial things, try to see whether the greatest philosophers, those whom you use to argue against your own sex, have ever determined what is false and contrary to the truth and whether they have not contradicted and blamed each other. You have seen this

² Christine's posture expresses melancholy. The ray of light evokes the scene of the Annunciation to the Virgin. This question has been explored by V. A. Kober, "The Annunciation to Christine: Autobiographical Empowerment in the *Book of the City of Ladies*," in Bronckian Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton, N.J.: Index of Christian Art, Department of Art and Archaeology, 1993), 171-96.

³ This story and variations on it are well known in the folkloric tradition.

yourself in the *Metaphysics*,⁴ where Aristotle argues against some opinions and speaks of Plato and others in this way. And note, moreover, how Saint Augustine and other doctors of the Church have criticized certain places in Aristotle even though he is called the prince of philosophers and was a supreme master of both natural and moral philosophy.

"And it seems that you think that all the words of the philosophers are articles of faith and that they cannot be wrong. And as for the poets of whom you speak, don't you know that they have spoken of many things in fables,⁵ and that many times they mean the opposite of what their texts seem to say? And one can approach them through the grammatical figure of *antiphrasis*, which means, as you know, that if someone says this is bad, it actually means it is good and vice versa. I therefore advise you to profit from their texts and that you interpret the passages where they speak ill of women that way, no matter what their intention was. And perhaps this man who called himself Matheolus understood things in his own book in this way: for there are many things in it which, if taken literally, would be pure heresy. And as for the accusations against the holy estate of marriage ordained by God, put forth not only by him and others but even by the *Romance of the Rose* to which people give greater credence because of its author's great authority,⁶ it is clearly proved by experience that the contrary of the evil that they say exists in this estate through the fault of women is true. For where has there ever been a husband who would permit his wife to dominate him in such a way that she could have the right to abuse and insult him, as those who speak of women claim? I believe that, no matter what you have seen written, you will never with your own eyes see such a husband; these lies are painted too badly. I tell you in conclusion, dear friend, that simplicity has brought you to your current opinion. Come back to yourself, recover your good sense and do not bother yourself anymore with these absurdities. For you should know that all evil things that are said about women in such a general way only hurt those who say them, and not women themselves."

4. Suzanne Solente has shown that Christine was familiar with St. Thomas's thirteenth-century commentary on the *Metaphysics*. See her edition of the biography of Charles V, *Le Livre des faves et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, 2 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1935-41), I:131-32. Christine mentions St. Thomas in part 3, chapter 68 of the biography and in *Christine's Vision*.

5. As in the *Letter from Othea* and at the beginning of *The Tale of the Shepherdes*, Christine emphasizes that certain stories, or fables, can have a hidden meaning.

6. Christine's opinion on the *Romance of the Rose* became clear in *The Debate on the Romance of the Rose* (see p. 41).

*Here Christine Tells How the Lady Who Had Addressed Her
Told Her Who She Was, Her Character and Her Purpose,
and Announced to Her How She Would Build a City
with the Help of the Three Ladies*

The renowned lady spoke these words to me. I do not know which one of my senses was more engaged in her presence: my hearing, by listening to her worthy remarks, or my sight, by looking at her great beauty, her attire, her dignified bearing and her most honorable countenance. And the same applied to the others, for I did not know which one to look at, for the three ladies resembled each other so much that one could hardly tell them apart, except that the last one, though of no less authority than the others, had such a fierce look on her face that whoever looked into her eyes, be he ever so bold, would not commit any misdeed, for it seemed that she always threatened the evildoers.

I was standing before them, having risen to show my respect, and looked at them speechlessly, just like someone who is too dumbfounded to utter a word. And I felt great admiration in my heart, wondering who they could be and how much I would like, if I only dared, to ask their names and who they were; and to ask about the significance of the different scepters that each one carried in her right hand, which were of great richness, and to ask why they had come here. But since I considered myself unworthy to address such questions to such high ladies as they appeared to me, I did not dare, but rather continued to look at them, half afraid and half reassured by the words I had heard which had made me move away from my first ideas. But the wise lady who had addressed me and who knew in her mind what I was thinking, just like someone who is clear-sighted in everything, responded to my thoughts as follows:

[The lady informs Christine that they are the daughters of God who have come to this world to bring order and to advise humans. The mirror the lady carries signifies self-knowledge. Her sisters will explain themselves in an instant.]

"But now I will explain the reason for our coming. I want to make known to you that we do nothing without good cause and that our appearance here is not in vain. For, although we are not common to many places and our knowledge does not come to all people, nevertheless you, for the great love you have for inquiring into the truth of things through long and continuous study, for which reason you are here alone and separated from the world, you have earned to be visited and consoled by us as our dear friend, in your trouble and sadness, so that you might have a clear vision into the things that contaminate and trouble your heart."

"There is another greater and more special reason for our coming which you will learn from what we tell you: you should know that we have come to remove from the world the same error into which you have fallen, so that from now on ladies and all valiant women may have a refuge and a defensive enclosure against so many different assailants. These ladies have been abandoned for so long, exposed like a field without a hedge, without finding a champion who would appear for their defense, notwithstanding the noble men who by order and right should defend them, but who through negligence and lack of interest have let them be mocked. It is therefore no wonder that their envious enemies and the outrageous villains, who have attacked them with various weapons, have won the war against the defenseless ladies.

"Where is there a city, be it ever so strong, that could not be taken if no one showed resistance, or a cause, be it ever so unjust, that cannot be won by someone who pleads without opposition? And the simple good ladies, following the example of suffering that God commands, have gladly suffered the great offenses that, by speaking and by writing, have wrongfully and sinfully been done to them by those who claim to have the right to do so from God. But now it is time that their just cause be taken from Pharaoh's hands, and this is why we three ladies, that you see here, moved by pity, have come to you to announce a certain edifice built like the wall of a city, with strong stones and well constructed, which you are predestined and made to build with our help and counsel, and where no one will live except all ladies of renown and worthy of praise: for to those who are without virtue the walls of our city will be closed."

Here [Christine] Tells More about the Lady and How She Speaks to Christine about the City She Has Been Commissioned to Build and How She Will Help Her Build the Wall and the Enclosure That Goes around, and Then the Lady Tells Her Her Name

"Thus, fair daughter, you have been given the prerogative among women to construct the City of Ladies, for whose foundation and completion you will take and draw from the three of us fresh water as from clear fountains, and we will give you plenty of material, stronger and more durable than marble, even if it were cemented. Thus your city will be incomparably beautiful and will last forever in the world.

"Have you not read how King Troos founded the great city of Troy with the help of Apollo, Minerva, and Neptune, whom the people of that time believed to be gods, and also how Cadmus founded the city of Thebes by order of the gods?⁷ And yet in the course of time these cities

7. As in the *Letter from Othlea and The Book of Fortune's Transformation* Christine draws on the thirteenth-century compilation of ancient history known as the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* [Ancient history up to Julius Caesar] for information on these ancient kingdoms, including the Amazons and others she treats in these opening chapters.

have fallen and have turned into ruins. But I prophesy to you, as a true sibyl,⁸ that this city which you will found with our help, will never be destroyed, nor will it fail; it will forever prosper in spite of all its jealous enemies. Although it will be attacked in many assaults, it will never be taken or vanquished.

"A long time ago the Amazon kingdom was founded by the order and enterprise of several courageous women who despised servitude, as you have learned from the testimony of history books. And for a long time afterwards they maintained it under the rule of several queens, most noble ladies whom they themselves elected, who governed them very well and who kept up the rule with great strength. Nonetheless, although they were strong and powerful and during their reign conquered a large part of the Orient and terrified all the neighboring lands, and although the Greeks feared them, who were then the flower of the world's countries, nonetheless, after a time the power of this kingdom failed, so that, as it happens with all earthly reigns, nothing but the name has survived to the present time.

"But you will build a much stronger edifice in this city that you must fashion. In order to begin its construction I have been commissioned, through the deliberations of us three, to deliver to you durable mortar, without any blemish, to lay the strong foundation and to raise the wide walls around, high and thick, with huge towers and strong bastions with moats around, fortified by block houses, as is fitting for a city with a strong and lasting defense. And, following our design, you will lay them deep, so that they will last longer, and then you will raise the walls above them so high they will fear no one.

"Daughter, now I have told you the reasons for our coming, and so that you will lend more credence to my words, I want to tell you my name, by whose sound alone you will be able to understand and know that, if you want to follow my orders, you have in me someone who will administer your work in such a way that you will be unable to make a mistake. I am called Lady Reason; now you see that you have good guidance. For now, I will say nothing more."

[Now the other two ladies identify themselves. The second lady's name is Rectitude. More of heaven than of the earth, she upholds the rights of the poor and the innocent. She holds a ruler in her hand with which she separates right from wrong and which will serve to measure the walls of the city. She declares herself Christine's assistant. The third lady is called Justice. She resides in heaven, on earth, and in hell, meting out what everyone deserves. She carries a gold vessel adorned with the fleur-de-llys, or lily of the Trinity. All virtues come from her. She will help Christine complete the

8. The ten Sibyls were wise women, able to predict the future. Boccaccio speaks of them in *Concerning Famous Women*. They appear at the beginning of book 2 of the *City*. See E. J. Richards's complete translation of *City* (New York: Persea, 1982), 99-104.

city and bring in its population of worthy ladies and the queen. She will then hand over the keys of the city to Christine.]

Here Christine Tells How She Spoke to the Three Ladies

When the three ladies had finished their speeches, to which I had listened intently and which had taken away from me all the unhappiness I had felt before their arrival, I immediately threw myself at their feet, not just on my knees but completely stretched out because of their great excellence. Kissing the earth around their feet, adoring them like goddesses of glory, I began to pray to them: "Oh ladies of the highest dignity, lights of the heavens and illumination of the earth, from where did your highnesses receive such humility that you deign to descend from your pontifical seats and shining thrones to come to the troubled and dark tabernacle of this simple and ignorant student? Who could be sufficiently grateful for such a privilege? You have already penetrated and moistened the dryness of my mind with the rain and dew from your sweet words that have descended on me; it now feels ready to germinate and bring forth new plants prepared to bear fruits of profitable virtue and delectable savor. How will such grace be given to me that I should have the privilege, according to your words, to build and fashion a new city that will exist from now on in this world?"

"I am not St. Thomas the apostle, who through divine grace built a rich palace in heaven for the king of India,⁹ nor does my feeble sense know the crafts, nor the measures, nor has it studied the theory and practice of stonework. And even if through the possibility of study these things were to become comprehensible to me, from where would my feeble feminine body take sufficient strength to undertake such a huge project? But nevertheless, my most respected ladies, although I am stunned by this news, I know well that nothing is impossible for God, and I cannot doubt that whatever is undertaken with your counsel and help should not come to a good end. Thus I praise God with all my strength and also you, my ladies, who have so honored me that now I am set up in this noble commission, which I accept with great joy. Here I am as your handmaiden, ready to obey. Command and I will obey, and may it be done to me according to your words."¹

Here Christine Tells How, by Reason's Commandment and Help, She Began to Dig into the Earth in Order to Lay the Foundation

Then Lady Reason answered and said: "Up and about now, daughter! Let us go without delay to the field of letters: there the City of Ladies

9. This story appears in the *Acts of Thomas*, one of the Apocryphal books of the New Testament and also in book 9, chapter 65 of Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* [Historical Mirror]. Christine's source for most of book 5 of the City.

1. Cf. Luke 1:38, after the Annunciation by the angel that she would be the mother of Christ, "Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word."