

Coping with Isolation: Strategies of Some Medieval
French Noblewomen

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Seulette sui par tout et en tout estre.
Seulette sui, où je voise, où je siée;
Seulette sui plus qu'aultre riens terrestre;
Seulette sui, de chacun délaissée;
Seulette sui, durement abaissée,
Seulette sui, souvent toute esplourée;
Seulette sui sanz ami demourée.¹

[I am alone wherever I may be; I am alone whether I walk or remain seated; I am more alone than any other creature on earth; I am alone, abandoned by all; I am alone brought down as far as I can go; I am alone often engulfed in tears; I am alone totally without love.]

With these poignant words, Christine de Pizan expressed eloquently and simply her feelings of complete solitude after the death of her husband. Probably the first woman in medieval Europe to verbalize in print her personal anguish, Christine's words at the same time describe the human condition, which by definition is one of isolation. This condition is often masked in various ways, but the ultimate truth is that each individual is obliged to face mortality, illness, disappointment, success, failure and all the other vicissitudes of existence essentially alone even when surrounded by strangers, acquaintances, friends, or family. This somber and difficult state causes virtually every human being to search for ways to overcome it and find means either to avoid it or to link with others to try to forget temporarily the inevitable. Blaise Pascal described these efforts as weaknesses that for him translated into attempts to avoid confronting man's true mortal state which could be dealt with, in his opinion, only in religious terms. In fact, Pascal considers the most serious flaw of a human being to be the inability to endure solitude: "j'ai découvert que tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos, dans une chambre."² The constant attempt to avoid the pain of

our existential solitude manifests itself in many ways in modern life: bars filled with men and women chatting against a background of loud music; festivals in small and large towns that provide activities for crowds of people who seek to rub elbows with both strangers and acquaintances; sexual adventures; workaholic behavior: all in an attempt to avoid the solitude of Pascal's empty room.

Obviously, the desire of men and women to connect with others in an attempt to share life's joys and sorrows and to counteract, even for a short time, the pain of solitude and isolation did not originate with Pascal in the seventeenth century but was simply articulated by him. The existential solitude described by Pascal and the social solitude doggedly chosen by Christine de Pizan after her husband's death contrast sharply with the isolation imposed upon many of the female characters found in the *lais* of Marie de France. While unhappy but not dissatisfied, Pascal and Christine do not seek to change their situation unlike Marie's women. Although early medieval French writers do not speak directly of the experience of separateness from others, it can be observed that it is the isolation of the female fictional characters that serves to launch the plot of many *lais*, *romans*, or *ballades*. For example, Marie de France's female protagonists are often depicted in isolation within their marriages, in a literal as well as a psychological sense, and therefore seek companionship furtively through extra-marital love. The wife in "Le Laüstic"³ is kept a virtual prisoner in her house and establishes contact with the man who lives across the garden. Although the relationship based simply on their gazing at each other during the night remains innocent, the jealous and cruel husband, determined to reestablish the total isolation and control of his wife, strangles the nightingale she has used as an excuse to spend nights at her window. The lady is once again cut off from any contact outside the walls of her house.

In the description in "Yonec"⁴ of the youthful wife locked in a tower with an elderly sister-in-law as her only companion, Marie is much more explicit. She insists on the husband's advanced age and unsympathetic demeanor: "vielz e antis" [old and antique] (v. 12) and "cist vielz gelus" [this old jealous man] (v. 71) to emphasize the distance between the couple. Furthermore, Marie describes the young woman's only companion as "veille . . . e vedve sanz seignur" [old and widowed, without a lord] (v. 30) and adds that she was permitted no contact with the other women who lived in the tower nor with any male servants. Her profound unhappiness that leads to the loss of her beauty and her will to live derives directly from her

imposed isolation. Temporarily more successful than the wife in "Laustic," the young woman attempts to dispel her desperate loneliness by daydreaming. The sweet breezes of April cause her to conjure up a bird/knight whom she takes as her lover. Having found pleasant companionship as well as love, she recovers her lost beauty and, in addition, "sule remaneit / plus volentiers qu'el ne suleit" [she remained alone more willingly than had formerly been the case] (vv. 239-40) according to her elderly companion. Even though her lover is murdered by her cruel husband, she is never again totally isolated because of the birth of a son whom she raises to avenge the knight.

In "Guigemar"⁵ Marie de France uses once again the same basic scenario: a "mult. . . vielz hum" [a very old man] (v. 210) married to a young and beautiful woman of excellent family of whom he is "gelus. . . a desmesure" [unreasonably jealous] (v. 213). This wife is also supervised closely, this time in a small house within a luxurious garden which can be approached only by the sea. Her only companion is a pleasant young woman with whom she is permitted to attend mass performed by an aged, impotent priest. Despite the fact that her life is surely more pleasant than that of the young wives in "Laustic" and "Yonec," the words "La fu la dame enclose e mise" [There was the lady put and imprisoned] (v. 245) make clear that she, too, is a prisoner and isolated from the world. Her companion in this gilded cage, the niece of the jealous husband, demonstrates loyalty to the young wife and not to her relative, but her presence does not suffice to replace all other companionship. Since the sole access from the outside world is from the sea, a boat brings her a lover, whom she must first nurse back to health. She describes in her own words to the newcomer the conditions of her existence in a way that confirms and expands on Marie's narrative presentation of the situation:

Riches hum est, de haut parage,
Mes mut par est de grant eage.
Anguissusement est gelus;
.....
Dedenz cest clos m'ad enseree.
N'i ad fors une sule entree.
Uns viels prestre la porte garde:
Ceo doinse Deus que mals feus l'arde!
Ici sui nuit e jur enclose;
Ja nule fiez nen ierc si ose
Que j'en ise s'il nel comande,

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Si mis sires ne me demande.
Ci ai ma chambre e ma chapele,
Ensemble od mei ceste pucele. (vv. 341-354)

[He is a rich man of good family, but he is very old and extremely jealous. He keeps me inside this enclosure, which has only one entrance. An old priest guards the door: May he burn in hell! Here I am confined both day and night. I cannot leave this place without the priest's permission or my husband's order. Here I have my room and my chapel, and this young woman as my companion.]

The young wife's obvious resentment at her confinement and separation from the world sets the stage for the beginning of the extra-marital love affair with the stranger that lasts for a year and a half before being discovered. After further imprisonment and separation from the knight, she is able to join her lover to live happily ever after.

These three young women share the fate of being separated physically from the world by stone walls but also experience psychological separation from other human beings because of their husband's jealousy and advanced age. In order to overcome this isolation, all three reach out to connect with a younger man in a loving relationship. The emotional link makes the physical solitude more bearable.

Three hundred years later Christine de Pizan also depicts a fictional female protagonist forced to face the adversities of life in a state of painful isolation, but the setting is no longer the world of shape-shifters and magic ships that come and go at will. The lady in *Les Cent ballades d'amant et de dame*⁶ is portrayed as a typical upper-class wife of the fifteenth century. She is permitted to go out, to receive visitors, and is often surrounded by acquaintances. However, deprived of intimacy in a marriage that appears to be quite stable and is not described in the negative terms found in Marie de France's *lais*, she is deeply tempted to become involved in an extramarital love affair that promises a closeness that she has never known.

The story is related in a series of ballades with the lover and the lady alternating as speaker. Most striking in the fifty ballades in which she speaks is the isolation of the lady's life. As she faces the increasingly passionate demands of her amorous suitor, she wrestles with her conscience as she considers the consequences of infidelity. In the particularly moving fourteenth ballade, she states that ". . . me

sens si nue/de conseil. . ." [I feel totally deprived of counsel] (vv. 23-24). The adjective "nue" [naked] conveys a vulnerability that surpasses the simple statement that there is no one in her life whom she can ask for advice or in whom she can confide. The only people around her are the insistent suitor, a distant and suspicious husband, and the "mesdisans" [gossips] (XVI, 15) who are waiting for her to misstep, so that her honor can be ruined.

While Marie's goal was to provide vicarious entertainment to her largely female audience, Christine's *Cent Ballades d'amant et de dame* serves as a warning to her contemporaries of the dangers of becoming entangled in a web woven by Love. The solitude and isolation faced by the female protagonist from the beginning of the work to the end is palpable as she anguishes alone in indecision, faces the consequences of her lost honor alone and finally dies alone having experienced only a few fleeting moments of happiness in the arms of the man she loved. The fates of Marie's ladies are far from ideal, but the reader is given hope that all hope of happiness is not lost. For Christine's lady, on the other hand death is her only possible escape from the pain of solitude.

Seulette suis à huis ou à fenestre,
Seulette sui en un englait muciée;
Seulette sui pour moy de plours repaistre;
Seulette sui, dolente ou appaysiée;
Seulette sui. Rien n'est qui tant me siée.
Seulette sui, en ma chambre enserrée,
Seulette sui sans ami demourée. (vv. 8-14)

[I am alone at the door or at the window; I am alone hidden in a corner; I am alone to drown myself in tears; I am alone whether grieving or at peace. I am alone and there is nothing that pleases me so much; I am alone locked in my room; I am alone without anyone to love.]

Christine's expression of her personal solitude in "Seulette sui" demonstrates her deep empathy with the solitude and isolation of the young woman in *Cent Ballades d'amant et de dame*. However, there are two important differences between Christine and her female protagonist. First, Christine's personal solitude began long before she became a widow. She shared the experience of so many noblewomen of spending her life in a country other than that of her birth

and of speaking every day a language that was not her first. She further isolated herself from her contemporaries when, after the death of her husband, she chose not to remarry and to support her family financially by writing, a traditionally male profession. She further exacerbated her solitary state by becoming involved in the production and illustration of the manuscripts of her work, another male bastion. Secondly, line 12 points out that despite her loneliness and suffering, she is pleased at being alone: "Rien n'est qui tant me siée" [There is nothing that pleases me as much]. Neither Christine's nor Marie's fictional women would ever make such a statement. They seek only to escape their solitude.

Christine succeeded in turning her personal solitude into an asset that fostered learning, reflection, and the written expression of her intellectual discoveries.⁷ Having no female role models, she was obliged to find her own path of expression and identity (Cerquiglini 266). But despite the successes of her involvement in the world around her, she continued to combat the pain of solitude that she expresses so well in "Seulette sui." In her last years, she substituted reflection and prayer almost entirely for her former activities when she retreated to an abbey to complete her days. Sorrow and pain, however, continue to be her constant companions as she states in her last poem, *la Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*: "Je, Christine, qui ay plouré / XI ans en abbaye close" [I, Christine, who have wept for eleven years in a walled abbey].⁸

Christine de Pizan was, therefore, the most qualified woman of her day to provide counsel for young noblewomen sent to reach maturity in the court of their prospective husbands, often distant from their place of birth. Not only had she regularly experienced the position of being a stranger in a strange land, but she possessed the wisdom and the skills that permitted her to articulate guidelines for the behavior needed to protect these young women from the political and personal traps that surrounded them. Christine shares her wisdom with Marguerite de Nevers, the granddaughter of her patron the Duke of Burgundy in the *Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor*.⁹ Married at the age of eleven to Louis of Guyenne and sent to live at the French court, Marguerite was expected to become Queen of France.¹⁰ Christine tactfully avoids negative comments that would spell out the specific dangers encountered by women (or children) who find themselves alone among strangers. Instead, she warns of the temptations that lie in wait for these privileged persons: the lure of vanity, comfort, wealth, pride, power, and influence (Book 3, pp.

72-73). In language heavy with Biblical intonations, she emphasizes that despite their high station in life, these women are, in fact, no different from those hungry and in rags except that they are in even more danger of damnation (Book 4, p. 74). To fight against these dangers, she counsels them to pursue both the contemplative life and the active life; in short, the two methods that she herself used to combat the solitude of her existence and the challenge of surviving successfully at court (Book 6, p. 69). Christine further advises on the selection of companions: they must be informed, ethical, and wise to help avoid the pitfalls to be found at every turn (Book 8, p. 83). Echoing the moral of the *Cent Ballades d'amant et de dame*, she counsels these isolated noblewomen to "cherish honor and good reputation above all things in this earthly world" (Book 11 p. 90).

In addition, Christine offers specific advice on the selection of those who will surround the young princess. The men should be "not too young, nor too talkative, nor too handsome, preferably married with their wives at court" (p. 125). The women should "include both older and younger women" with particular attention given to their virtue (p. 125). Implicit in her advice is her intimate knowledge of the solitude of life at court even when surrounded with crowds of people who ostensibly live only to please the young and powerful. The innocence of the young and vulnerable dims the realities of court life and leads them into situations that can compromise their virtue and reputation for the rest of their lives (Book 24, pp. 125-129). The safety of seeking solace in religious and charitable activities while avoiding any hint of compromising their virtue must have seemed as unappealing to the young as it seemed prudent to the more experienced. In any case, Christine's pragmatic advice reveals her ability to comprehend and her skill in articulating the dangers and temptations that loneliness can present even in a crowd.

Most women did not possess the peculiar combination of characteristics that allowed and compelled Christine de Pizan to choose a life of both financial and intellectual independence. A much more common situation for women who found themselves alone was to serve as patrons of writers, scribes, and illuminators. In her article entitled "Women and Books in France: 1170-1220,"¹¹ Patricia Stirnemann asserts that when noblewomen were faced with solitude, they became especially active as literary and artistic patrons. As evidence, she notes that Marie de Champagne commissioned Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot* when her husband was on crusade and that she paid the clerk Evrat to compose a lengthy text on the book of Gene-

sis after she became a widow. Eleonore de Vermandois, a niece of Eleanor of Aquitaine and first cousin of Marie de Champagne, commissioned an exquisite group of illuminated manuscripts after her divorce in 1192. Blanche de Navarre, widow of the son of Marie de Champagne and regent in Champagne, sponsored the production of a series of vernacular manuscripts. Jeanne de Flandre, grand-daughter of Marie de Champagne, whose first husband Ferrand spent most of his married life as a prisoner, is considered responsible for the production of a particularly unique psalter as well as Chrétien's *Conte del Graal*. Stirnemann concludes that since these women of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were normally relegated to a position subordinate to the males of their families, it is not surprising that when they are alone and unprotected, they leave a historical trail all their own (252).

It is interesting to note that the fictional women created by both Marie de France and Christine de Pizan are depicted as seeking to alleviate their loneliness in only one way: by finding a lover. In contrast, in her own life, Christine de Pizan, while depicting her solitary state and the pain it causes in very clear terms, sought other means to deal with it. Furthermore, she states clearly that she has chosen to remain alone as demonstrated by the first verse of her ballade on loneliness: "Seulete sui et seulete veuil estre." [I am alone, and alone I want to be.]

In the *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, she again asserts her choice of the solitary life:

J'ay choisie pour toute joye
(Quelqu'aultre l'ait), telle est la moye,
Paix, solitude voluntaire,
Et vie astracte et solitaire.¹²

[I have chosen for all my joy/(no matter what else there may be), such is mine,/Peace, voluntary solitude,/And a withdrawn and solitary life.]

The verse demonstrates that Christine expresses joy as well as sorrow in her solitary state. While these two emotions are seemingly contradictory, she genuinely feels both. She is not alone in such a declaration. In the early sixteenth century, Madeleine des Roches expresses precisely the same sentiment after she becomes a widow for the second time: "J'aime plus que jamais mon vivre solitaire." [I

love more than ever my solitary life.]¹³ Like Christine de Pizan, Madeleine found fulfillment in her intellectual activities. Her daughter Catherine des Roches chose the solitude of the single life, so that she could avoid the responsibilities of a household and children and devote her time and energy to writing. While the fictional women who attempt to break their isolation through adulterous love meet with only limited and short-lived success, at least some historical women valued the freedom they gained from the absence of a husband and searched for other ways to fulfill their need for companionship.

In a recent book of essays, *Approaching Eye Level*, Vivian Gornick echoes both Christine de Pizan and Madeleine des Roches as she weighs the joys and sorrows of solitude, isolation, and loneliness. Like them, she values the freedom that comes from independence and periods of solitude while she yearns for connections to other people.¹⁴ Gornick distinguishes chosen solitude (cf. Christine and Madeleine) from the more problematic social isolation (cf. Marie de France's heroines). She describes the many ways in which human beings can connect in modern life, ways which alleviate the loneliness suffered by many. A brief interaction with a clerk in a store, the exchange of a few words with others waiting in line for a bus, shared goals in a group at work—all serve to link one person to another if very briefly. Such informal interactions were denied the three women described above in Marie de France's *lais* but not denied to the historical women. Like Christine de Pizan and Madeleine des Roches, Gornick understands that for writers, at least, a certain amount of separateness, however painful, must be maintained.

The existential solitude that constitutes part of the human condition has not changed through the centuries and twentieth-century men and women continue to search for a balance between the pain of solitude and isolation and the productivity that can be gained from them. Pascal's solution of enforced isolation that requires constant contact with the awareness of mortality and the need of God's grace seems extreme to most. The anguish associated with such suffering may lead to eternal salvation, but certainly for some it interferes with creative activities and basic human happiness.

Despite the more than eight hundred years that separate us from the time of Marie de France and the more than five hundred years that have elapsed since Christine de Pizan dared to record her reflections, the distance between their time and ours appears to diminish somewhat as it becomes clear that the issue of human solitude has

changed very little. The lives of some fictional and historical medieval women examined through this lens seem close to our own and their ordeals acquire a relevance with which we can identify.

Christine's ballade clearly expresses her sorrow and grief but at the same time states openly that she has chosen the solitary path:

Seulette sui et seulete veuil estre;
Seulette m'a mon doulx ami laissée;
Seulette sui, sanz compaignon ni maistre;
Seulette sui, dolente et courroussiée;
Seulette sui, en languour mesaisiée;
Seulette sui, plus que nulle esgarée;
Seulette sui sans ami demourée. (vv. 1-7)

[I am alone and I wish to be alone; my sweet love has left me alone; I am alone without companion or master; I am alone sorrowful and distressed; I am alone and languish in misery; I am alone more destitute than anyone else; I am alone without anyone to love.]

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Notes

- ¹ Christine de Pizan, "Seulete sui, et seulete veuil estre," (vv. 15-21), *Christine de Pizan's Ballades, Rondeaux, and Virelais. An Anthology*, ed. Kenneth Varty (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1965) 7. The translation is mine.
- ² Blaise Pascal, "Pensées," *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 1138.
- ³ *Les Lais*, ed. Jean Rychner (Paris: Champion, 1973) 120-125.
- ⁴ Rychner 102-119.
- ⁵ Rychner 7-32.
- ⁶ Ed. Jacqueline Cerquiglini (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1982).
- ⁷ Jacqueline Cerquiglini, "The Stranger," *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski (New York: Norton, 1997) 269.
- ⁸ Angus J. Kennedy and Kenneth Varty, "Christine de Pizan's 'Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc,'" *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 18 (1974): 39, vv. 1-2. ⁹ Christine de Pizan, *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor. The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, trans., Charity Cannon Willard., ed. Madeleine Perner Cosman (New York: Persea, 1989).
- ¹⁰ Charity Cannon Willard, "Christine de Pizan's Advice to Women." *A Medieval Woman's Mirror of Honor. The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, trans. Charity Cannon Willard, ed. Madeleine Perner Cosman (New York: Persea, 1989) 39.
- ¹¹ Patricia Stirnemann, "Women and Books in France: 1170-1220," *Representations of the Feminine in the Middle Ages*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Dallas, TX: Academia, 1993) 247-252.
- ¹² *Le Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*, ed. Suzanne Solente Vol. IV (Paris: Picard, 1966) vv. 23633-36.

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¹³ Domna C. Stanton, ed., *The Defiant Muse. French Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1986) 47.

¹⁴ Tilde Sankovitch, *French Women Writers and the Book. Myths of Access and Desire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1988) 51.

¹⁵ Mary Kay Blakely, "Eyeing Loneliness," rev. of *Approaching Eye Level*, by Vivian Gornick, *The Nation*. 21 Oct. 1996: 12.

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