

selection from Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*, edited and translated by Geri L. Smith (Iter Press / Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017), pages 29-31; 34-35; 42-44; 46-48.

Inclusion in “Always Here” inspired by Blake Gutt’s brilliant article “Transgender mutation and the canon: Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*,” *postmedieval* 11.4 (2020): 451-458.

The Book of the Mutability of Fortune

I. Here beings *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*

(lines 1-50)

How will it be possible for me, simple and of little intelligence, to express appropriately what cannot be easily assessed or well understood? However much one has been able to learn, one could not fully describe what I yearn to write. That is because of the great variety of specific adversities and occurrences comprising the heavy burdens that the fickle influence of deceitful Fortune engenders. They are the result of her vast repletion, itself a veritable abyss of unfathomable depth. I cannot help but fall short in undertaking a work as vast as describing the envious nature of her deception. It would be difficult for me to speak of it adequately, given my limited intelligence, when many distinguished people have written about it and have been incapable of recording all that can be said about her.

I certainly will not give up, however. Fortune has dished out so many of her portions to me that I have grounds to speak about her. And I will not keep quiet about the good or bad that I may be able to recount, even though my understanding of her deeds might be subject to reproach. I learned about her maneuvers through various unfortunate incidents that happened to me because of her. They made my understanding much keener than it had been in the past. Without them, I would not have come to know so much about her ways. It is therefore right to reason that misfortune sometimes has a purpose, because it can teach at the same time. So I do not intend to tell lies to anyone who, without deaf ears, will rightfully be able to understand the true goal toward which I intend to strive.

II. Here the person who wrote this book speaks of how they¹ served Fortune, as they will explain in what follows

(lines 51-88)

Now I would like to tell of an occurrence which many may find impossible to believe. Even though some will disbelieve, it is proven truth evident and fully experienced, and it happened to me personally. I was about twenty-five years old. When it happened to me, it was not a dream; I will truthfully recount a great wonder. No one should be surprised by it, however, because Fortune, who disguises everything, making and breaking at her whim, brought about the entire transformation I will recount here. Since it was her doing, no one should marvel at what happened. Although she knows how to deceive, everyone can clearly see that she has the power

¹ This pronoun is not in Smith’s original translation, but brought in based on Gutt’s argument about more accurate translation for the paratext here. See Gutt, 465.

to govern all that goes on in the world. Even though she is vain and impure, the entire world lies under her hand, as far as transitory things are concerned. She can dole out losses and victories, honor, possessions, and the contrary. She can, in surprising ways, bring about things that seem impossible, and white out things that seem possible. One sees her bring many things to their opposite conclusion, even unexpectedly changing the forms of bodies; that is an even greater marvel. The changes she effects are very widespread, and she has infinite power over all finite things.

(lines 89-122)

I will recount how I saw Fortune, who is not the same to all people (even though she is invisible, she is plainly visible to the naked eye), and how I lived with her and tasted many a misfortune. She is a great crowned queen, more feared than anything ever born, with a grand and very powerful court where there are many different kinds of people. Whoever wishes to can learn a lot there, taking the good as well as the bad. One becomes wise by learning well, and gets ahead by serving. As Scripture says, for the one who strives to serve well, to serve is to rule. Such a person rightly deserves praise and honor. By serving, one becomes master. It is therefore good to serve, if by serving well one merits good recompense and glory, or a good friend, male or female. But that is not at all how it turned out for me. I do not know if I made a mistake in serving, because I earned very little reward for it. I endured cruel suffering, many hard times, and tiresome and troublesome work, without anything getting any better for me. I am afraid that the fault lies with the master, however, because good recompense comes to one who serves a good master.

(lines 123-156)

Now I will tell of how, by the will of those closest to me, I was placed at Fortune's court, where I stayed for a long time. I intend to explain to you where her strangely built dwelling is situated, and the strange and dreadful ways and deeds that I witnessed while I was at her court, where many a misfortune occurs. I will tell what I learned, what happened to me there, how Fortune did not forget me when she was moved to help me in my time of great need, and of the help she gave which barely sufficed for me.

To make my goal in addressing this topic more understandable, I will tell you who I am, I who speak, and who from female became male because of Fortune. Because she wanted it that way, she changed me, body and face, into a complete, natural man. I once was a woman; in fact I am a man. I am not lying—my ordeals are sufficient evidence of that. And while I may have been a woman in the past, what I am saying is the truth. Through a fiction I will recount the act of the transformation, how I turned from a woman into a man. And when the story becomes known to all, I want this tale to be called "The Mutability of Fortune."

[plot summary for lines 157-338: the narrator-Christine describes his nameless father's immense wealth, by which Christine means his great learning and knowledge, imagined here as a series of precious stones that Christine's father takes from the precious fountain of the Muses.]

V. Here she speaks of her mother

(lines 339-378)

My mother, who was great and boundless and more valiant than Penthesilea (God made her well!), in every way surpassed my father in wisdom, power, and worth, even though he was very

learned. She was crowned queen as soon as she was born. Everyone is well aware of her strength and her power. It is plain to see that she is never idle. Without being belligerent, she busies herself everywhere with many different tasks. Her works can easily be proven—they are found everywhere, and she creates many lovely ones every day. Anyone who tries to count up all the deeds that she has done and that she does every day would never finish. She is old without aging, and her life cannot end until Judgment Day. God put her in charge of augmenting and maintaining the world ever since he made it, to sustain human life. She is called Lady Nature. She is the mother of every person; God calls us all brothers and sisters.

Now that I have told you about my very illustrious parents, I will tell you my name, whether anyone wants me to or not. Although it is little known, in order for my name to be stated correctly, take the name of the most perfect man who ever was, and you must put I.N.E. with it. No other letter is needed.²

VI. Here she tells how she gathered only scrapings of her father's treasure

(lines 379-434)

My father, of whom I have already spoken, had a wish and strong desire to have a male child who would be his heir, to take over his riches, which would not diminish through generosity, as he would say; I remember it well. He and my mother, in agreement, conceived me with that hope. But my father's aim was not realized, because my mother, who had much greater power than he, wanted to have a female child similar to herself. Thus I was in fact born a girl. My mother did so much for my father, however, that I resembled him in every way, right and truly, except in sex alone.³ As far as manner, body, face, even our nature, I was so like him that you would have believed we were the same in almost all respects.

Thus I was called daughter. My mother loved me very much and nurtured me in an atmosphere of kindness. She loved me so and held me so dear that she nursed me herself as soon as I was born. Sweetly she took care of me during my childhood, and I grew, thanks to her. There was no care or worry then, and I needed nothing but to play, as was typical, with the children of my age. But since I was born a girl, it was not the norm that I would benefit from my father's wealth. More by custom than by right, I could not inherit the wealth that was taken at the esteemed fountain. If justice ruled, the female would lose nothing in this regard, no more than the son. But I am absolutely certain that in many places, custom rules over justice. Therefore, due to a lack of learning, I lost out utterly on this very rich treasure. That made me very unhappy with such a custom. If it were otherwise, I presume that I would have been rich, satisfied, and fulfilled with the treasure taken from the fountain, because I was very willing and still had a great desire to draw deeply from it. That is not something that just came over me yesterday.

(lines 435-468)

I desired it more than anything on earth, but that did not matter at all; things could only go according to the custom, may it be cursed by God! Thus I am like the very passionate and desirous lovers who cannot see or hear what they wished to enjoy. I resemble them in this regard, because I desire what I do not have, which is the treasure that great knowledge gives to those

² That is, "Christ" + I.N.E. = Christine.

³ Here we follow Gutt's emendation, which more closely follows the French original ("[f]ors du sexe tant seulement"), rather than Smith's translation, which uses the word "gender," rendering this line "except only for my gender" (Gutt, 456; Smith, 34).

who love possessing it. And even though I was female, which is why I could not have the wealth I spoke of, I had the inclination for it, because of my true nature and also in order to resemble my father. I could not refrain from stealing the scrapings and the little bits the small pennies and the little coins that fell from the very great wealth that my father had in such bounty. And even though I have but little of it, considering my very strong appetite, the only reason I have any at all is because I took it furtively. So I have amassed meager wealth, which is quite obvious in my work. What wealth I have benefits me greatly, however, and it does me good. No other wealth is rightfully mine and at least this has stayed with me, whatever I may have lost thanks to twisted Fortune. It will not falter until I die.

[*plot summary for lines 469-1124*: Christine's mother, Nature, sends him to the court of Fortune to finish being raised. When it is time for his marriage, his mother sends him some of her jewels: discretion, consideration, retentiveness, and memory—imagined here as precious stones in a crown. Christine also reflects here on the relationship between God and Nature, and theorizes why some people are more virtuous than others. Fortune sends Christine on a mission, sailing to visit the court of Hymen, where the narrator-Christine is married a handsome young man. They remain together at the court of Hymen for ten years, and Christine praises his husband as good and loyal friend, and a master of navigation, able to steer a ship in any season.]

XI. Here is told of some miracles by Gods, as related by Ovid

(*lines 1025-1056*)

It is now time for me to recount, as I promised at the beginning of this book where I put my name, the strange case, the extraordinary story, of how when I went back to Fortune's home, I turned from a woman into a man; it is a very astonishing thing. And it is neither lie nor fable to speak according to metaphor, which does not exclude truth, as Fortune certainly has the power over those under her authority to create even greater miracles than that. Often, when it pleases her, she makes beasts transform into lords so great that all welcome them favorably. And she can make knights turn into beasts when she wishes. That was quite apparent when, long ago, she made the seafaring Ulysses arrive at Circe's port. Pretending to be friendly, Circe offered a drink to Ulysses's knights, which laid them out on the ground as if disabled, and they were transformed into pigs. My lady herself had prepared the drink to that trapped them, and she made them arrive there willingly, in order to give them over to misfortune. She knows plenty about how to do such things, for which many endure harsh circumstances!

(*lines 1057-1093*)

Fortune performs infinite marvels every day, even more incredible than those, without stopping. She can do that easily, because her workings are so much greater than those of the two snakes that Ovid tells us about in his book. There he tells of a man, whom he names, who became a woman through an event that occurred. The case went like this, in my view: this man found two snakes coupling in a wood where he was frolicking. He took a stake and proceeded to strike them, as he feared that they could quickly kill him. But the one ill he suffered from it was becoming immediately aware of his whole body having been transformed. He was changed into a complete woman right then, and found himself to be in that state everywhere he checked. The young man, named Tiresias, was shocked. He stayed that way for seven years, during which he spun and toiled at the work that women do. At the end of that time, he went deep into the woods,

and by chance he found the two snakes together, as the written text attests. He again took a stake, I believe, and said right then that he wanted to see if he could regain his previous form. He struck the snakes. His coloring and all his feminine feelings immediately changed, and his body turned into a man's as before, according to Ovid.

(lines 1094-1131)

We are also told of a king of Lydia who hated women so much that he ordered his wife the queen, who was pregnant and about to give birth, that if she had a girl, she was to burn her or kill her in some ignominious way, on pain of death, because he did not want a daughter. But if it were a boy, she was to keep him, because there would be no wrong in that. The queen had a girl, and in no way did she abandon her to a cruel or bitter death; her maternal instincts kept her from that. Rather, she raised her as a boy and spread the word that she had had a handsome son. The king believed it. The girl had a perfectly lovely body and face. Her name was Iphis, a name that served for a girl or a boy. Soon she grew up big and strong, but under boy's clothing. Iphis's mother denied that she was a girl, for fear that the child's father would banish her. Instead, he wanted Iphis to marry without delay. The mother said it was too soon. After a long point, it was decided. Iphis's mother could not dissuade him from it. At that point, the queen was dismayed and loathed her life, because she could not come up with any more tricks or ways to hide Iphis. Thus she well feared being disgraced, and did not know how to hide the truth any longer. So she wept quietly, in secret.

(lines 1132-1158)

She went to the goddess Vesta. She knelt at the temple, wetting the floor with her tears. She offered gifts and oblations, altar candles, devotions, wax, incense and vows, and sacrifices of heifers and oxen. On bare knees, she struck her breast. She prayed and begged the goddess to come to her aid in this need, which had brought her to the brink of death. She prayed with such devotion that the goddess took pity on her. Vesta showed it clearly by making a sign. The queen took some comfort in that and hurriedly left the temple. The preparations were underway for Iphis's wedding, which the king had hastened. There was joy and great celebration. This was how it came to pass: the goddess performed a great miracle, and the night filled the queen and her daughter Iphis with joy. Iphis had turned into a boy, thanks to the skilled goddess Vesta, who undid her woman's body and made her a son.

XXII. Here she tells how she lost the master of her ship

Ovid recounts these miracles, but it is fitting that I tell you about my own transformation. I was changed by the visitation of Fortune, transformed from a woman into a man. ...

[plot summary for lines 1159-1310 : Fortune summons Christine from the court of Hymen. Hymen prepares a ship for Christine and his husband. After days and nights of smooth sailing, they are hit by a terrible storm, and Christine's husband is knocked overboard and drowns. Christine tries to throw himself into the sea after, but is held back by the remaining members of his household. They grieve together, and Christine cries violently, tormented by the loss, and believes he will never find joy again.]

(lines 1311-1361)

I did not stay that way, however. I have taken many steps on solid ground since then. To put it briefly, my grief was so intense and my eyes wept so many tears that even Fortune took pity on my hardship. As a good mistress, she wanted to do me a kindness and help me in my suffering. But the help was extraordinary! I do not know if it was an even greater danger. At one point, as a result of being tired out from such extended weeping, I was languishing in a completely broken state. As if lifeless, I went to sleep early one evening. Then my mistress, who diminishes the joy of many, came to me and touched me all over my body. I remember well how she manipulated every limb and held them in her hands. Then she left and I stayed.

As our ship went along with the waves of the sea, it struck violently against a rock. I awoke, and things were such that I felt immediately and without a doubt that I was entirely transformed. I sensed that my limbs were much stronger than before, and my great despondency and grieving had faded somewhat. Then, completely bewildered, I felt myself. Fortune, who had transformed me this way, did not abandon me then, because she suddenly changed the great fear and doubt that held me in utter confusion. And I felt much lighter than I used to, and my flesh was transformed and stronger, my voice much fuller, and my body harder and quicker. But the ring that Hymen had given me had fallen from my finger, which grieved me, as well it should have because I loved it dearly. Then I easily got up, and I no longer stayed in the sloth of weeping that had been increasing my distress. I found my heart strong and bold, which astonished me, but I felt that I had become a true man.

(lines 1362-1385)

And I stood there, astounded by the occurrence. I lifted my eyes, by chance, and saw the sail and mast demolished. The powerful weather had similarly broken the ropes and tops as well. Our ship was severely smashed and cracked all over, and the seething water pushed its way in. The ship was already so heavy with water that had she not been protected by the rocks against which she had hurled herself, she would indeed have sunk to the bottom.

When I saw her shipwrecked in that way, I undertook to repair her myself. With nails and mortar and a strong hammer, I rejoined the planks. I gathered moss from the rocks and stuck it in the cracks, in great quantity, in such a way that I made the ship sufficiently watertight. I rejoined the broken ends, and had the ship's hold drained. In short, I was very capable of making use of whatever was necessary to guide the ship.

(lines 1386-1416)

As soon as I had learned to steer her myself, I became a good master of the ship. I had to be that way, by necessity, in order to rescue myself and my household, if I did not want to die there. Thus I was a true man—it is not a fiction—capable of guiding ships. Fortune taught me that skill, and thereby took me from that situation.

As you are hearing, I am still a man, and I have already been one for a total of more than thirteen full years. But it would please me considerably more to be a woman, as I was used to being when I would speak with Hymen. But since Fortune has taken me away from there, and I will never dwell there again, I will remain a man. And I will stay with my lady, even though I have encountered so many hardships in her service that I am ravaged by them. But I have to live there until death. May God deliver me from it, into salvation! I pulled myself from between those rocks, readied my ship, and headed toward the place from which I had embarked at the beginning of this part, where my lady had her dwelling. I arrived there in little time, even though I had had great misfortune. I was not soon at the end of it.

XIII. Here she tells how she returned from her mission

(1417-1460)

At that point I returned to the place I had left some time earlier, but I was able to observe its nature and what could exist there much more keenly than I had in my youth. And notwithstanding the great and bitter wrong I had suffered, my mother, who was always a friend to me, never forgot me. Because whether it was in sleep or in wakefulness, or through changes I may have undergone, or in difficulty or harm that Fortune caused me, or through long hardship or short-lived joy, or for any adornment that may have been made for me or crown that may have been placed on my head, my crown never left me. It was my share of my mother's wealth, and she had crowned me with it. It suited me very well, as I recounted earlier when I was telling of my mother and me.

But the stones have often been disturbed since then, and covered with the dust that flies on grief, which frivolous Fortune blows. But the stones were so much brighter then than ever before, and they grew greatly at the time I became a man. It is surely by their power that I came to port and learned how to steer ships and know the garden where Fortune lives, she who deprives everyone of great happiness. Then it was time for me to perceive the nature and know the ways of the court where I had been placed, better than I had in the past. So I will tell you what I saw there and all that I came to know of my lady's dwelling place, of her ways and conditions, and of her great transformations (she does not stay still even for an hour.)

[*plot summary*: the rest of *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*, some 22,176 lines of verse, tell the history of the world as a series of stories about how Fortune raised and then threw down heroes, kings, and entire civilizations. To blend Kevin Brownlee's description with Blake Gutt's insightful reading, one might see the entire book as "a universal history framed by a personal"—trans—"history."⁴]

⁴ Kevin Brownlee, quoted in Smith, "Introduction," *The Book of the Mutability of Fortune*, 14.