

## A Servant-Rhetoric

The rhetoric of Christine de Pisan deals not with the speech of a leader in the public forum, but with the conversation of a leader in the servant's role. Her rhetoric is a servant-rhetoric but not because it is addressed only to those in lowly position; she addresses both queen and lady-in-waiting. Rather, it is a servant's rhetoric because it prescribes that one speak to serve others. De Pisan defines the queen's role as peace-maker in her advice to her husband, as the preserver of his honor, and as a reconciler of king and noble when a merciful oversight would serve the state better than a strict but bloody justice. For ladies-in-waiting and queens alike, she prescribes not only the ends of rhetoric but its means. Given the social limitations on her audience, she views their rhetoric as interpersonal conversation. She absolutely forbids the use of slander and requires a "soft tongue" and "gentle speech."

This servant-rhetoric stands up well under in comparison to biblical standards for speech. De Pisan views rhetoric as a tool for service. Her ideal leader is not a philosopher-king, nor an expert, nor even just a good man. Rather, her ideal rhetorician knows that "he that is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:11). De Pisan prohibits slander because it comes from hate and envy, recognizing that "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matt. 12:34).

Rhetoricians may reject the humility of de Pisan's servant-rhetoric, believing that it is both product and cause of the social suppression of women.<sup>1</sup> Its source, however, is not social oppression but an extension of the biblical principle that exalts not the leader but the servant.<sup>2</sup> This servant-rhetoric thus has profitable implications for the Christian rhetorician.

---

<sup>1</sup> It may also be rejected because it deals exclusively with intrapersonal speech rather than speech in the public forum. I believe that de Pisan's servant-rhetoric can and should be extended to different contexts, but there is not space enough to do so in this précis.

<sup>2</sup> This principle is everywhere present in the Bible, most notably in the teaching of Jesus quoted above (Matt. 23:11). But it is interesting that the first instance of this principle is seen in the creation of woman. Creation clearly ascended to the highest creation, man, and specifically to woman, but the woman was created to be a helper fitting for Adam. (See unpublished lecture notes for Dr. Stewart Custer's class on Ethics.) The virtues of service have been consistently identified as feminine virtues (and wrongfully degraded because of that connection). Thus it is interesting that the one to advance such a servant-rhetoric was a woman.