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RÉSUMÉ – Les bibliothèques reflètent des ordres des livres fondés sur la sélection et l'exclusion. L'article vise à comprendre comment elles ont cristallisé l'histoire complexe des relations de genre. Il étudie les collections réelles des bibliothèques féminines et les imaginaires des bibliothèques au féminin du XIV^e au XVI^e siècle afin de mettre au jour les alternatives que lectrices et autrices ont alors fait émerger.

MOTS-CLÉS – bibliothèque, genre littéraire, lecture, femmes, Moyen Age, Renaissance

DOUDET (Estelle), « Les bibliothèques au féminin. Pour une autre histoire de l'ordre des livres (XIV^e-XVI^e siècle) »

ABSTRACT – Libraries reflect book orders based on selection and exclusion. This article aims to grasp how they crystallized the complex history of gender relations. It examines both women's collections and the representations of women in libraries in French texts from the 14th to the 16th century in order to uncover the alternatives that women readers and authors brought to light during that crucial period.

KEYWORDS – library, literary genre, reading, women, Middle Ages, Renaissance

WOMEN IN LIBRARIES

Towards an Alternative Order of Books (Fourteenth-Sixteenth Century)

The Malterer tapestry, intended for a female convent in Freiburg im Breisgau in the early fourteenth century¹, shows Aristotle turning away from his book wheel to seek the courtesan Phyllis's favours. The European success of Henry of Andeli's *Lai d'Aristote*², reflected in this tapestry, is largely due to the comic motif of the book lover giving in to sexual desire. The same cliché seems replayed in *The Music Man*, a 1957 musical by Meredith Wilson adapted for the cinema in 1962³. The hero falls in love with the librarian Marian whom he decides to seduce at her workplace. The comparison of the two works is striking because of what it says about the ongoing changes in long-dominant sexual representations: the *Ratio*, the intellectual activity that the Fathers of the Church associated with the masculine, is now declined in the feminine, leaving to men the seductions of the *Caro*, the wiles of the flesh. But on closer examination, these libraries shaken by sexual difference highlight two things that are perhaps one and the same: we laugh at a departure from the cultural when Aristotle loses control of himself and of his books; we laugh at a return to the natural – or to what American society in the Fifties considered as such – when Marian looks up from her catalogues to discover love and marriage.

The tension between what Old French called *nature* and *nourriture*, the innate and the acquired, the private and the public, the feminine and the masculine is an anthropological trend that has for centuries

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- 1 The *Malterer Tapestry (The Wiles of the Woman)*, ca. 1325, Augustinermuseum, Freiburg im Breisgau.
 - 2 Henri d'Andeli, *Le Lai d'Aristote, Les dits d'Henri d'Andeli*, ed. A. Corbellari, Paris, Champion, 2003.
 - 3 *The Music Man* (fr. *Le Marchand de fanfares*), dir. M. da Costa, 1962, 1963 Oscar for best music.

shaped the representations of libraries. As André Malraux demonstrated in *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*⁴, the museum aims to include all kinds of audiences since its invention in the nineteenth century, when the library promotes homosociality, gathering people of the same background, the same culture and, for a long time, the same sex⁵. As worlds of order and distinction, libraries crystallize the complexity of the gender relationships: power, hierarchy, and sometimes reversibility. The constants and evolutions of these representations, which are to a large extent shaped by the texts collected by libraries, have hitherto been brought to light by historians who study the links between gender and literature, whose surveys have grown significantly in number since the end of the twentieth century⁶. My analysis is in line with this epistemic trend, but with a specific objective. It aims to grasp how libraries in European vernaculars, as real places and as imaginary spaces, have long functioned on the basis of selection and exclusion, but also on connection, creating and reflecting on alternative orders. In this regard, what did libraries have to say about the world and what did they do with the world, in this case with the masculine and the feminine⁷? I will attempt to demonstrate that women can be regarded as an alternative order in French libraries during the pivotal moment constituted by the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The new word “*bibliothèque*” spread in French roughly between the development of humanism around 1350 and the widespread acculturation to books supported by the printing press around 1500. The meaning of the old “*librairie*” shifted to refer to the collections owned by individuals. “*Bibliothèque*”, by contrast, then designated a place of scholarly conservation and also a catalogue commemorating texts and authors to be known, such as the one which Conrad Gessner drew up

4 A. Malraux, *L'Homme précaire et la littérature* [1977], Paris, Gallimard, 2010, p. 56.

5 E. Kosofsky Sedwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985. For the evolution of vernacular twelfth- to sixteenth-century literature from homosocial to heterosexual representations, see L.-G. Tin, *L'Invention de la culture hétérosexuelle*, Paris, Autrement, 2008.

6 See *Femmes et littérature. Une histoire culturelle*, vol. 1, ed. M. Reid, Paris, Gallimard, 2020.

7 This research is in dialogue with William Marx's *Living in the World's Library*, Paris, Collège de France, 2020. Its original oral version, presented at the Collège de France at the invitation of Prof. Marx, has been entirely revised for the English translation. For the use of fifteenth-century “*bibliothèque*” as a new epistemic model for Medievalists, see Z. Stahuljak, *Médiéval contemporain. Pour une littérature connectée*, Paris, Macula, 2020.

around 1545 for the European Latin production, and as La Croix du Maine and du Verdier did for French forty years later⁸. Decades earlier, the first debates around the pantheons of the best vernacular writers had already been sparked; female readers and authors played a major role in these from the beginning of the fifteenth century. Furthermore, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, the traditional monastic and academic reading communities were joined by the secular networks of courts and cities and even in competition with them. Different ways of reading spread, from solitary and silent reading to collective listening⁹. In illuminated manuscripts in Middle French, scenes of reading and writing multiplied, giving increased prominence to the figure of the reader. Finally, one of the major changes of this period was the considerable increase in the number of archives that allow us to learn more about the collections owned by men and women.

Yet, was it then possible to imagine what I propose to call here “*la bibliothèque au féminin*” (the library in the feminine)? Rather than “*les bibliothèques féminines*” (women’s libraries), which designate historical collections read and/or owned by women, I will suggest using this term to survey a material as well as an imaginary space where the power relations imposed by the different valencies of the sexes were both exposed and thwarted. I aim in particular to demonstrate how the feminine then functioned as a power of “*estrangement*” in fourteenth- to sixteenth-century libraries. This polysemous term designated in Middle French the foreignness of what comes from outside, the otherness and the difference, but also the surprise caused by an alternative order of books. If women were surely readers and often bibliophiles, if we know them to have been scribes, booksellers, and increasingly authors, did they have their place in the symbolic order of the “*bibliothèque*”?

I will first show how the library, the specific place of what Old French called “*letreüre*”, that is the literate knowledge, was assimilated during the fourteenth century with the humanist *studiolo*, the place of

8 R. Chartier, *Culture écrite et société: l'ordre des livres (XIV^e-XVIII^e s.)*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996, p. 114 *sqq.*

9 H. Haug, “L’histoire de la lecture médiévale”, *L’œuvre littéraire du Moyen Âge aux yeux de l’historien et du philologue*, ed. L. Evdokimova & V. Smirnova, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2014, p. 325-337.

work of the scholar, instituting a certain use of books that made women readers foreigners. Since the library is an order of books, my survey will then focus on the development of hierarchies between literary genres, and on the role that sexual difference played in this. By confronting the inventories of volumes owned by women and the books that they were believed to collect, I will seek to identify the meanings of these gendered classifications. Finally, I will examine the “*estranged*” status of female authors in a system of production and reception that has both exposed and marginalized them, and the ways in which they have attempted to reconfigure what I will term ‘negatives of the libraries’ as alternative orders of books.

THE LIBRARY, INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Between the end of the fourteenth- and the beginning of the sixteenth century, the multiplication of illuminated manuscripts intended for a lay readership gave unprecedented visibility to two motifs: women reading books and men working in libraries. A volume from the collection gathered by Anne de Polignac around 1530 highlights their differences¹⁰. A bipartite image illustrating Charles Bonin’s translation of the epistle on widowhood addressed by Saint Jerome to the Roman widow Furia shows, on the right, the bishop sending his work as a letter, which the addressee receives, on the left, as a book. Their relation seems well-balanced, but in the background of the image, the writer’s room appears filled with volumes on shelves, while the place where the lady keeps her collection is invisible. She reads in her room, he lives in the library.

Living in the library implies inhabiting a space where “*la letreüre*”, the transformation of reading into writing through the learned use of books, is accomplished. Augustinus details this process for Franciscus in Petrarch’s *Secretum*, published post-mortem in 1378:

10 Jerome, *Epistle LIV to Furia*, translated Ch. Bonin, France, ca. 1510; S. Hindman & A. Bergeron-Foote (ed.), *Flowering of Medieval French Literature*, Paris, Les Enluminures, 2014, p. 192-198.

*Quotiens legenti salutare se se offerunt sententiae, quibus vel excitari sentis animarum vel frenari, noli viribus ingenii federe, sed illas in memorie penetralibus absconde multoque studio tibi familiares effice*¹¹.

St Augustine's advice should come as no surprise to his interlocutor because, as Brian Stock has pointed out¹², reading books, drawing up an anthology of quotations, and transforming them into material for reflection and writing were all literate techniques valued by the humanists. Fifteenth-century French writers summed them up in a few key expressions, "*cerchier les scriptures*", "*tourner les livres*", repeated when they talked about their book collections¹³. But unlike Montaigne, who later claimed to appreciate the conversation of books more than that of women¹⁴, Franciscus admits here his dissatisfaction with reading in his *studiolo* while Laure, the recipient of his poems, is absent. Although Augustinus denounced the danger of "*estrangement*" that this penchant posed to Franciscus, the latter was not entirely convinced¹⁵. In place of the debate, illustrated by Jerome and Augustine himself, between the love of God and that of ancient literature, Petrarch substitutes an unresolved tension between the closed *studiolo* of the humanist and the open world of the woman reader.

What makes the woman reader alien to this kind of library is the way she is supposed to handle her books. According to many writers of Old and Middle French romance, reading entertaining literature in the vernacular induces in women an attitude that gives rise among men to an irresistible desire to interrupt them. Eyes lowered, book placed on the chest or the knees, body made available,

11 "Whenever in reading you come across maxims that excite your soul or hold it back, do not trust your mind alone but hide them deep in your memory and try to make them familiar to you by dint of meditating on them", Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum meum*, ed. G. Regn & B. Huss, Mainz, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2004, p. 212; unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

12 B. Stock, *Bibliothèques intérieures*, Grenoble, Million, 2005, p. 40-41.

13 "*Ay curieusement encerchié par les discours des saintes escriptures*" ["I searched diligently through the texts of the Holy Scripture"], Alain Chartier, *Le Quadrilogue Invectif*, ed. F. Bouchet, Paris, Champion, 2011, p. 7.

14 Michel de Montaigne, "De trois commerces", *Essais*, ed. M. Rat & A. Thibaudet, Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 806.

15 Augustinus argues that Laure's love distracts Franciscus from self-knowledge; that love poetry in Tuscan is a production outside of scholarly writing; that the courtship of a laywoman leads to too much appreciation of worldly glory; *Secretum meum*, p. 280-284.

this is how Froissart remembers seeing his first love in *L'Espinette amoureuse* in 1369:

[...] *Moi vers elle*

M'en ving et li dis doucement:
"Par son nom ce rommanc comment
L'appellés vous, ma belle et douce?"
Elle cloj atant la bouce,
Sa main dessus le livre adoise,
Lors respondi comme courtoise
Et me dist: "De Cleomadés
Est appellés¹⁶." [...]

Vocalised, eroticized, female reading is fantasized not as a dialogue with books but as a conversation with a third party. It is therefore represented outside the symbolic sphere of the library, in alternative spaces like the gardens, the bedrooms or other venues that encourage the meeting between the sexes.

It is significant that the young lady seduced by Froissart likes *Cleomadés* by Adenet le Roi. In Arsenal MS 3142, which preserves this novel composed around 1280, the opening illustration shows the author sitting on the edge of Marie de Brabant's bed, discussing the story he is going to write, or perhaps already telling it to the Queen of France and her sister-in-law Blanche. At the end of the text, the concluding image reveals that the story has evolved from a literary performance for ladies to a volume offered to a bibliophile, Robert d'Artois. There is no need to insist on the perils that could arise from the interpenetration of the book and the bed in the woman reader's sphere. At the end of the sixteenth century, the seventh discourse of Brantôme's *Dames galantes* poked fun at what was already a commonplace in bawdy literature: the analogy between women's murmurs when they read books aloud in their bedrooms and their moans of love¹⁷.

16 "I went up to her and said, without rushing her: 'what is the title of this novel, dear beautiful lady?' She then closed her mouth, put her hand on the book and answered me politely and said: 'It is called *Cleomades*'", Jean Froissart, *L'Espinette amoureuse*, ed. A. Fourier, Paris, Klincksieck, 1972, p. 68, v. 698-706. See E. Birge Vitz, "La lecture érotique au Moyen Âge et la performance du roman", *Poétique*, 137, 2004, p. 45-51.

17 "Elle l'oyoit gazouiller tout bas, mais elle cogneut bien que ce n'estoit point la lecture qu'ell'avoit accoutumé, quelques jours avant, faire en son lict, avec sa bougie, pour mieus collorer son fait." ["She heard her twitter, but she knew that it was not the noise of the reading she had been

THE GENDERED REGULATION OF COLLECTIONS

Alien to the order of books that scholarly collections made material, women readers bring with them a dynamic that puts the very nature of libraries at risk: the ever-present possibility that they might disperse and/or appropriate men's books implies a necessary gendered regulation of reading practices and literary genres.

The comic dimension of this potential disorder has not escaped the attention of French-speaking playwrights, who have used it in several plays from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Their comparison reveals an interesting mutation in the staging of men's catalogues that have passed into the hands of women. In the thirteenth-century monologue of the *Département des livres*, a clerk makes an inventory of the volumes he lost during a tour of France. If he has left his "Juvenal in Bonival" and his "Virgil in Abbeville", the fault lies with "the taverns and the whores" that he has met, as Villon would later say¹⁸. Printed in Paris at the beginning of the sixteenth century, *La Farce de Maître Jehan Jenin* also features a student who, seized by madness, bequeaths his books to his mother. She helps him to make an inventory of academic works, treatises on medicine, law and rhetoric:

LA MERE

*Mon Ypocras je luy rasine
Et mes livres de medecine,
Aviscena et maistre Alain.*

FILIUS

*Tredille, cecy est tout plain,
Il [vous] fault tourner le feillet.*

LA MERE

*Je luy laisse mon Theodolet
Pour bouter ses petits garçons,*

accustomed to do, a few days before, in her bed to better hide her cunning"], Brantôme, *Recueil des dames, poésies et tombeaux*, ed. É. Vaucheret, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 466.

18 *Le Dit du département des livres*, ed. J. Engels, "L'autobiographie du jongleur dans un dit du ms. Paris, BnF, fr. 837", *Vivarium*, 8, 1970, p. 68-79, v. 47-50. François Villon, 'Ballade de bonne doctrine', *Le Testament* (1461), *Œuvres complètes*, ed. J. Cerquiglini-Toulet, Paris, Gallimard, 2014, p. 144.

*Puis aura mes decreterons
Et ma Phisiciè et les ars
Et mon livre ou sont mes Peres
Qui sont gros comme un munuel*¹⁹.

The comedy of male dissipation in the *Department* is followed in the farce by a woman's burlesque appropriation of books that do not suit her. This academic collection is "estranged", inadequate for an ordinary *bourgeoise*, at least at first sight. But things are not so simple because such catalogue is equally useless for the bad student, and the farce makes us laugh at this complexity.

In order to better understand the gendered dynamics at work in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century representations of the library, it seems useful to compare the volumes owned by women, as revealed in the after-death inventories²⁰, with the virtual collections they were believed to have gathered. In bringing these two models together, I am less interested in highlighting the gaps between the historical and the imagined libraries than in understanding how the "*bibliothèques au féminin*", seen as a means of selection and connection, have developed gendered reading practices and *vice versa*.

This question is particularly relevant for the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, because the extent of the archives preserved makes it possible for the first time to survey many private libraries. However, the incomplete information provided by men's and women's wills leaves many grey areas. Did women's *librairies* really differ from men's in the same social milieu? Who was reading what among the

19 The Mother (dictating her son's will): "I give her my Hippocrates / and my medical books, / Avicenna and Master Alain of Lille. The Son: by God, this page is full. / You need to turn the sheet. The Mother: I leave her my *Theodolus* / To put it to the young boys / And she will also have my Decrees, / And my *Physics* of Aristotle / And my collection on rhetoric, / As big as a register", *La Farce de Maître Jehan Jenin, Le Recueil Trepperel, les farces*, ed. E. Droz & H. Lewicka, Geneva, Droz, 1961, p. 75-76, v. 346-356. These were medical treatises by Hippocrates and Avicenna; the *Parables* by Alain de Lille; the *Theodolus*, an allegorical debate; probably a law book (*Decreterons*); the *Physics* by Aristotle and the *Partes orationis*, a rhetorical manual. All were classics of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* in medieval universities.

20 See H. Wijsman, "Les Livres de la damoiselle de Dreux: la bibliothèque d'une femme au seuil du xv^e siècle", *Livres et lectures de femmes en Europe entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, ed. A.-M. Legaré, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007, p. 67-80; and T. van Hemelryck, "La bibliothèque médiévale dans les livres. Entre fantasme et réalité", *L'œuvre littéraire*, ed. Evdokimova & Smirnova, p. 293-305.

books possessed by a couple or a family? We know for example that princesses have played a major role in book circulations. One of the copies of the *Très Riches Heures* of Duke Jean de Berry at the beginning of the fifteenth century was inherited by his daughter Bonne, who took it to her husband Amédée VII of Savoy, who bequeathed it to his daughter Charlotte, and so on²¹. Finally, since the kept copies are obviously not the sum of the texts that one person has read, how can we determine the share of expected purchases, familial legacies, personal choices, or of those unseen texts that were leafed through or heard elsewhere? Without claiming to have the answer to these questions, I will now examine, with all due caution, some commonly accepted criteria of differentiation for the “*bibliothèques au féminin*” in this period.

Women’s libraries, whether imaginary or historical, usually contained texts almost exclusively written in the vernacular of the time, in contrast to men’s collections marked by the presence of Latin. In the early fifteenth century, Jean Gerson encouraged his sisters, who came from the peasantry, to learn to read in French so that he could send them books:

*Je auroye tres grant plaisir et seroit chose tres profitable que vous peussiez aprendre a lire roumant, car je vous bailleroie livrez de devocion*²².

In so doing, the Parisian theologian underlines a second characteristic: the dominant role of spirituality. In fact, if women possessed only one volume, which was often the case, it was most certainly a prayer book. Statistics compiled by Geneviève Hasenohr from the libraries of twelve French-speaking princesses from the fourteenth- to the sixteenth century show that the number of devotional texts never fell below a quarter and often amounted to 50, 70 or even 80% of the total number of works inventoried²³. Of course, the notion of literary genre as we have understood it since the nineteenth century is not relevant to describe a

21 J. M. Hand, *Women, Manuscripts and Identity in Northern Europe, 1350-1550*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, p. 25.

22 “I would be very pleased and it will be profitable if you could learn to read in French, because I will give you a book of devotion”, Jean Gerson, “Sur l’excellence de la virginité”, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 7, *L’œuvre française*, ed. P. Glorieux, Tournay, Desclée & C^{ie}, 1968, p. 420.

23 The exception is the collection of 23 manuscripts gathered by Mahaut d’Artois in 1329, 17.5% of which were spiritual books and 35% fictional texts. In 1503, 83.5% of the 24 books collected by Margaret of York were devotional texts; G. Hasenohr, “L’essor des

group of stylistically diverse works (religious poetry, moralist fictions, hagiographic theatre), yet all characterized by their spiritual contents. In this case, the book collection reflects a form of life: inherited from their mothers and used in turn by them to teach the recipients' own children to read, religious books were objects read daily that ensured both the memory of a family and the salvation of the souls²⁴. The sixty-seventh story in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* reveals the power of these books. Abandoned with her Bible and her husband on a wild island near Canada, the heroine survives by her incessant reading while the man succumbs to privation²⁵. In this sense, many female libraries, whatever the social group considered, bear witness to the "*bibliothèque tibétaine*" in which André Malraux summarized medieval textual production and reception, seeing it as a canon of reading oriented towards religious practice²⁶.

In addition to these readings, the inventories reveal the habit, widely shared by male readers, of acquiring and keeping mostly practical texts: books on dietetics and health, chronicles useful for the education of the household, and a few classic novels, the knowledge of which was part of sociability. The bourgeois man who wrote *Le Mesnagier de Paris* for his young wife at the end of the fourteenth century found disturbing the story of Griselidis, the exemplary figure of female submission to a sadistic husband. But he nevertheless urged her to read it so that she would keep up with her position: "*desire bien que puisque autres l'ont veue, que aussi vous la veez et sacheez parler de tout parler comme des autres*"²⁷.

While the weight of social expectations is undeniable, one cannot help but notice the hiatus between the kinds of books actually acquired by female readers (women's libraries) and those for which they were believed to like and purchase above all (the '*bibliothèques au féminin*' or women in libraries): sentimental poetry, love novels. Admittedly, these genres induce a performative reading, which could explain why they

bibliothèques privées aux XIV^e-XV^e siècles", *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises*, vol. 1, *Les bibliothèques médiévales*, Paris, Promodis, 1989, p. 249.

24 Hasenohr, "L'essor des bibliothèques privées", p. 229.

25 Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptameron*, ed. N. Cazauran & S. Lefèvre, Paris, Champion, 2013, vol. 2, p. 721-725.

26 Malraux, *L'Homme précaire et la littérature*, p. 64.

27 "Since others have read it, I desire that you also read it and know how to speak of it as of the others", *Le Mesnagier de Paris*, ed. K. Ueltschi, Paris, LGF, 2010, p. 232.

escape the collections. But the constant discourse qualifying them as ‘feminine genres’ shows that a gendered typification was at work very early on. A poetry lover himself, Montaigne highlights the gender stereotypes attached to this art form:

Si toutesfois il leur faché de nous ceder en quoy que ce soit, et veulent par curiosité avoir part aux livres, la poésie est un amusement propre à leur besoin; c’est un art follaistre et subtil, desguisé, parler, tout en plaisir, tout en montre, comme elles²⁸.

Similarly, women’s fondness for sentimental novels, a commonplace still alive today, was said to be a consequence of their penchant for lust and lies, as female readers were supposed to read what they liked and to behave according to what they read. A most famous illustration of this commonplace is undoubtedly, in Dante’s *Inferno* (1314), Francesca da Rimini’s fate. She was punished for her adultery with Paolo Malatesta after having read with him a little too closely a passage from *Lancelot*:

*Quando leggemmo il disiato riso
esser baciato da cotanto amante,
questi, che mai da me non fia diviso
la bocca mi basciò tutto tremante²⁹.*

A constant strategy of fiction’s detractors was therefore to stigmatize virtual women’s libraries – the condemnable titles remaining identical from one century to the next, acting as symbolic markers – in order to better call for their dispersion:

Aussi chascun en particulier ne doit souffrir en son hostel non seulement livres inutiles, mais aussi pleins de lasciveté et pestiferes, attirans a vice, comme Lancelot du lac, le Roman de la rose, Tristan, Fierabras, Merlin, Florimond, Paris et Vienne, Pierre de Provence et Maguelonne, Mélusine.
(Juan Luis Vives, *L’Institution de la femme chrétienne*, transl. Pierre de Changy, 1543)³⁰

28 “If, however, they are reluctant to give in to us in any way, and wish to have a share in books out of curiosity, poetry is an amusement suited to their needs; it is a foolish and subtle art, disguised, full of words, all in pleasure, all in display, like them”, Montaigne, *Essais*, p. 801.

29 “When we had read that the desired smile / was kissed by such a beautiful lover / He, who will never be cut off from me, / kissed my mouth, trembling”, Dante, *Inferno*, V, v. 133-136, ed. R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 76.

30 “Also, no individual should suffer in his hostel not only useless books, but also those full of lasciviousness and pestiferous, attracting vices, such as *Lancelot du lac*, the *Roman de la*

Après quoi elle lui fit voir une grande liste de ces vieux romans, qui ont eu tant de vogue du temps de nos peres. Comme celui de la Rose, Lancelot du Lac, Tristan et ceux de cette volée-là [...] les autres Histoires véritables étant reléguées dans la grande bibliothèque, où la poussière témoignait qu'elles n'étaient pas tant en usage que ces belles fadaïses.

(Jean-Pierre Camus, 'Dilude', *Péronille*, 1626)³¹

It is probable that most of these critics were aware that the 'useless tales' were much less present in women's libraries than spirituality, hagiography, moral and educational texts. But were not the most cunning of readers those who knew how to hide the true contents of their libraries? The *Farce du Vendeur de livres*, preserved in the Rouen collection at the end of the sixteenth century, comically staged this possibility. Two "commères" set out to buy from a pedlar a *Roman de la rose*, some lives of saints and religious drama. All in vain, as the seller always offers them texts of a different kind:

LA PREMIERE FEMME

*Et les beaulx dis des sains,
Les a'vous poinct entre vos mains?
Les portés vous poinct imprimés?*

L'HOMME

*Non, mais j'ay les Dis rimés
De Marriage qui se plainct
De ce qu'il y a coqu mainct*³².

The edifying volumes demanded by the women clash in a verbal escalation with the misogynistic and obscene titles that the salesman shouts at the top of his voice. The comic relief of the play is that the real reason

rose, Tristan, Fierabras, Merlin, Florimond, Paris et Vienne, Pierre de Provence and Maguelonne, Mélusine", Juan Luis Vives, *L'Institution de la femme chrétienne*, Geneva, Slatkine reprints, 1970, p. 41.

31 "After which she showed him a large list of those old novels, which were so popular in our fathers' time. Like the *Rose, Lancelot of the Lake, Tristan* and those of that sort [...], the other true Histories being relegated to the great library, where the dust testified that they were not so much in use as these beautiful tales", Paris, Jacques Kerver, 1542, chapter V: "quelles escriptures elle doit lire" (USTC 40209).

32 The First Woman: "And the beautiful tales of the saints, / do you have them in your hands? / Do you have a printed copy of them? The Man: No, but I have versified discourses about Marriage, / complaining that there are many cuckolds", Ms. Paris, BnF, n.a.f. 24341, fol. 66; an old edition of the play can be found in *Recueil de farces, moralités et sermons joyeux*, ed. A. Leroux de Lincy & F. Michel, Paris, Techener, 1837, 4 vols.

for the buyers' anger is probably not their outraged virtue but the revelation of the titles they secretly love. As shown in this example, the "*bibliothèques au féminin*" constituted a fantasy defined by the contrast between books women claim they want and those they actually desire according to the stereotypes of the time.

WOMEN AUTHORS: TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE ORDER OF BOOKS

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the development of printing was accompanied by an explosion of sexist publications, giving a strong topicality to the *querelle des femmes* which has started in the previous century³³. In narrative fiction, addresses to female readers quickly took note of this editorial vogue, either to denounce the bawdy clichés or to establish a complicity with women who would be secretly amused by them. "*Lisez tout, lisez, lisez*" says the narrator of the opening tale in *Les Nouvelles recreations et joyeux devis* by Bonaventure des Périers³⁴. This reinforcement of the gendered polarization between (male) writers and (female) readers did not fail to complicate the position of women authors, especially as their constantly increasing number and social status from the twelfth to the sixteenth century made them more and more visible.

If the woman who reads was traditionally conceived as a stranger to the study library, even more *estrangé* is the woman who writes. Her presence in this place reveals her as a *monstre*, a literally extra-ordinary prodigy:

Amie, a qui Dieux et Nature ont concedé oultre le commun ordre des femmes le don d'amour d'estude, apreste parchemin, ancre et plume et escrips.
(France to Christine de Pizan, *Advision Christine*, 1405)³⁵

33 É. Viennot, "La fin de la Renaissance", *Femmes et littérature*, p. 251-253.

34 "Read everything, read, read!", Bonaventure des Périers, *Nouvelles recreations et joyeux devis*, ed. K. Kasprzyk, Paris, Champion, 1980, p. 17.

35 "My friend, you to whom, beyond all other women, God and Nature have given a gift and a taste for science, prepare your parchment, ink and quill, and write", Christine de Pizan, *Le livre de l'advision Cristine*, ed. C. Reno & L. Dulac, Paris, Champion, 2001, p. 16.

[...] *Un monstre fort estrange:
 Monstre je dy, car pour tout vray elle a
 Corps féminin, cuer d'homme, & teste d'ange.*
 (Clément Marot, Dixain du monstre to the Duchess of Alençon [Marguerite
 de Navarre], 1538)³⁶

Hybrid beings, the women authors somehow endanger the distinction between the *studiolo* where a man read to increase his knowledge, and the bedroom where a woman read to pass the time; or more exactly, they offer a reversed, alternative version of this representation, which I propose to call, in the photographic sense, “a negative of the library³⁷”.

At a time, roughly between 1350 and 1550, when authorship became visible through iconographic and textual representations of the library, it proved crucial for most women authors to display in their works the bodily and discursive habitus induced by this symbolic space. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet’s pioneering studies³⁸ have shown how the legitimacy of Europe’s first professional female writer, Christine de Pizan, rested in the early fifteenth century on her appropriation of the humanist *studiolo* described by Petrarch. Almost all the incipits of her texts and all the images she designed to adorn her manuscripts depict her reading and writing in her *estude*:

36 “[...] A very strange monster. / I say ‘monster’, because it is true that she has / a woman’s body, a man’s heart and an angel’s head”, Clément Marot, *L’Adolescence clémentine, Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Fr. Rigolot, Paris, GF-Flammarion, 2007, vol. 1, p. 163. See Catherine Müller, “*Monstrum inter libros*: la perception de la femme lettrée chez les humanistes de la Renaissance française (l’exemple de Camille Morel)”, *Livres et lectures de femmes en Europe entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, ed. Legaré, p. 133-138.

37 “The feminine is a dimension that is more insistent than obvious, elaborating itself in the detours of paradigms, founded on a mode of presence in and through absence, on a troubling ‘crossing of the negative’”, N. Mékouar-Hertzberg, “Ce que la littérature doit au genre, ce que le genre doit à la littérature”, *Le genre: effet de mode ou concept pertinent?* ed. N. Mékouar-Hertzberg, F. Marie & N. Laporte, Bern, Peter Lang, 2016, p. 169-184, quote p. 179.

38 See J. Cerquiglini-Toulet, “L’imaginaire du livre à la fin du Moyen Âge, pratiques de lecture, théorie de l’écriture”, *Modern Language Notes*, 108/4, 1993, p. 680-695; “Fondements et fondations de l’écriture chez Christine de Pizan. Scènes de lecture et scènes d’incarnation”, *The City of Scholars. New Approaches to Christine de Pizan*, ed. M. Zimmermann & D. De Rentiis, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1994, p. 79-96; “Le goût de l’étude. Saveur et savoir chez Christine de Pizan”, *Au champ des écritures. III^e Colloque international sur Christine de Pizan*, ed. E. Hicks, D. Gonzalez & P. Simon, Paris, Champion, 2000, p. 597-608; “La femme au livre dans la littérature médiévale”, *Livres et lectures de femmes en Europe entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance*, ed. Legaré, p. 29-33; “Le Moyen Âge”, *Femmes et littérature*, p. 21-218.

*Selon la maniere que j'ay en usage, et a quoy est disposé le exercice de ma vie, c'est assavoir en la frequentacion d'estude de lettres, un jour comme je feusse seant en ma cele, environnee de plusieurs volumes de diverses matieres*³⁹.

But, despite her exceptional status as a writer, Christine found that she was still a displaced reader in her own *librairie*⁴⁰. There she found herself confronted with books that were aggressive, even hateful, towards women. These books, Christine declares, are “*estrangé*⁴¹”; they are not texts that she herself has selected but that have imposed themselves on her by their notoriety. Some of them are openly misogynistic, like the *Secreta Mulieribus* by Pseudo-Albert the Great, which inspires Christine with disgust for the female body⁴². Others, more devious, addressed women to convince them of the validity of the discourses that condemned them, while not assuming these critics themselves; this is the case of the *Lamentations of Matheolus* translated by Jean Lefèvre around 1380, and above all of Jean de Meun’s section of the *Roman de la rose*⁴³. The debate that Christine de Pizan opened in 1401 around this work, considered to be the foundation-text of French literature, is a first instance of criticism of the gendered hierarchies implicitly articulating this order of books.

Another response is the creation of some ‘negatives of the library’. This was the purpose of *La Cité des dames* in 1405. In this place built on the model of the *Bibliotheca instructa*, the fortress of books “*et closture de deffence contre tant de divers assaillans*⁴⁴”, each stone bears the image of a powerful, virtuous or learned woman:

un certain edifice en maniere de closture d'une cité fort maçonnée et bien ediffiée, qui a toy faire est predestinée et établie par nostre ayde et conseil, en laquelle n'abitent fors

39 “According to my habit and my way of living and working, that is, studying books, one day I was sitting in my study, surrounded by several volumes of various subjects”, Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des dames*, éd. P. Caraffi, E. J. Richards, Milan, Luni, 1997, p. 40.

40 On the notion of the displaced reader, see R. Krueger, *Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 17-32.

41 Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des dames*, p. 40.

42 Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des dames*, p. 76.

43 *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. A. Strubel, Paris, LGF, 1992, p. 800-802, v. 15199-15256.

44 “A fence of defence against various assailants”, Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des dames*, p. 54-55.

*toute dame de renommee et femmes dignes de loz, car a celles ou vertue ne sera trouuee les murs de nostre cité seront forclos*⁴⁵.

The city of the ladies is a closed building, yet with windows, like a dream library; a library that would welcome women and would be open to the *estrange*, in particular to literary texts written in other vernacular languages. To the prestige of the *Roman de la Rose*, the Italian Christine opposes *The Divine Comedy*, a book that she maliciously advises Jean de Meun's defenders to discover in translation⁴⁶. Indeed, translation from one vernacular to another has long been an activity favoured by women authors, from Marie de France who, at the end of the twelfth century, transposed into "romant" "*les contes ke jo sai verrais/ dunt li Bretuns unt fait les lais*" to Anne de Graville who offered the Queen of France a poetic adaptation of Boccaccio's tale *Teseida* at the beginning of the sixteenth century⁴⁷.

Several objectives are assigned to this new way of framing the issues. Firstly, the feminine negative of the library may contribute to de-gendering intellectual history by revealing unexpected connections between men and women writers. *La Cité* invites us to dream that among the books kept at Plato's bedside after his death were Sappho's poems⁴⁸. Secondly, the negative stereotypes attached to women readers must be combated through alternative representations of their use of books. In contrast to the cliché of the fiction-loving coquette, Christine's *Epître Othea* shows women of all ages reading under the aegis of Diana,

45 "An edifice made in the form of a fence, a strong and well-built city, which you are predestined to build with our help; in it dwell only worthy women of good repute, for to her who has no quality, the walls of the city will be closed", *ibid*.

46 "Read the book called the Dant, or have it exposed to you for what it is in the Florentine language", Christine de Pizan to Pierre Col, *Le Livre des epistres du debat sus le Rommant de la Rose*, ed. A. Valentini, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016, p. 200. *Le Chemin de longue étude* (1405), an allegorical journey through the fields of knowledge, takes its title from the *Divine Comedy*, of which Christine was one of the few readers in France at the time: see Christine de Pizan, *Le Chemin de longue étude*, ed. A. Tarnowski, Paris, LGF, 2000, p. 154, v. 1127-1138.

47 "The tales and songs which I know in truth were composed by the Bretons", Marie de France, *Guigemar, Lais Bretons (XII^e-XIII^e s.)*. *Marie de France et ses contemporains*, ed. N. Koble and M. Séguy, Paris, Champion, 2018, p. 168, v. 19-20. Catherine Müller, "Jeanne de la Font et Anne de Graville, traductrices de la *Téséide* de Boccace au XVI^e siècle", *D'une écriture à l'autre: les femmes et la traduction sous l'Ancien Régime*, ed. J.-P. Beaulieu, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 2004, p. 187-210.

48 Christine de Pizan, *La Cité des dames*, p. 160.

goddess of chastity⁴⁹. French women writers of the sixteenth century undoubtedly contributed to this trend by focusing on moral and educational writing, by favoring self-presentations with books being given to other literate women, and by encouraging their readers to take up the pen, as did Louise Labé⁵⁰. Finally, it is the library, as selection and classification of works and authors, that women writers and readers should organize together, a task that was all the more urgent as the first literary vernacular pantheons began to emerge. In 1581, Marie de Romieu concluded her *Brief Discourse* on the qualities of women with a list of contemporary fellow writers. Her alternative Parnassus included not only those who published, such as Marguerite de Navarre and the dames des Roches, but also patrons of the arts such as Catherine de Medici, and intellectual network leaders such as Antoinette de Loynes and the Countess of Retz⁵¹. The salon, which triumphed from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, was a following step in the long journey that led women writers and readers from the “*chambre des dames*” to the public library.

CONCLUSION

“Literature is open. Lock up your libraries”: surveying the history of the library as a symbolic site for male dominations was a key issue in *A Room of One's Own*⁵². The disturbing analogy between the forms of invisibilization denounced by Virginia Woolf in 1929 and noted by

49 See fol. 107^r in London, British Library, Harley 4431, an illuminated manuscript revised by Christine.

50 For some examples in the sixteenth century, see Anne de France, *Enseignements à sa fille (1503-1505)*, ed. É. Viennot & T. Clavier, Saint-Étienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2007; the illustrations of Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 322, where the master of François de Rohan painted Marguerite de Navarre and her friend the Duchess of Etampes; Louise Labé, *Œuvres*, ed. E. Giudici, Geneva, Droz, 1981, p. 17-19.

51 *Les Premières Œuvres poétiques de Ma Damoiselle Marie de Romieu Vivaroise* [...], Paris, Lucas Breyer, 1581, quote in C. La Charité, “La décennie féminine de Marie de Romieu”, *Lectrices d'Ancien Régime*, ed. I. Brouard-Arends, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003, p. 317-330.

52 V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929], London, Penguin Books, 2004, p. 120.

Christine de Pizan five centuries earlier could lead to the conclusion that history has come to a standstill on that matter, whereas library attendance rates would rather suggest a radically changed situation for women and men readers in the twenty-first century. Breaking out of the impression of cultural changelessness or progressive teleology requires careful investigation of the complexity of gender-related representations and practices attached to the library, understood as an order of book.

In Western Europe, particularly in the French-speaking regions chosen for this survey, the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were an important moment in this complexity, since they were characterized by three entangled phenomena. “*Librairies*” then became hypervisible as public and private places where reading was strongly connected to learning and writing. By contrast, they helped define spheres where books would be used differently, for example for pleasure (entertaining literature) or for practical purposes (devotional books). As a book collection based on a selection process, the library made visible different classification principles for texts in French, many of which, either attested or fantasized, were gender-based. Finally, as a vision of the world and a mode of relationship, the library invited those who were not included in its system to explore alternatives. The development of the “*bibliothèques au féminin*” – which does not only refer to books owned by women readers but also to increasing reflections on the presence of ‘women in libraries’ – made fourteenth- to sixteenth-century collections much more flexible than imagined.

However, one might ask whether these reflections have had a concrete impact on the ‘ideal library’ projects that bloomed at the end of the sixteenth century. At least one of them in French reflects a change. “*La Bibliothèque parfaite*” presented by the bibliographer La Croix du Maine to the king of France in 1583 was a singular model of book collection, both carefully organized and highly heterogeneous⁵³. In the midst of a hundred or so ‘*buffets*’ classifying texts not by types of writing but according to their connections to the world, appeared a shelf devoted to “famous women and others” (*Femmes illustres et autres*). As far as I know, it was the first time that this type of catalogue included women, while

53 F. de La Croix du Maine, *Premier volume de la Bibliothèque du sieur de La Croix du Maine*, Paris, Abel L’Angelier, 1584, p. 509 [online].

relating them to otherness (“*et autres*”). Ambiguous, *estrange*, La Croix du Maine’s invitation to welcome ‘women in libraries’ nevertheless reflects new possibilities for thinking differently about the order of books.

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