

Christine de Pizan (circa 1364–1431): 'I am a widow lone, in black arrayed' – prolonged grief or persistent complex bereavement

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Christine was one of the first professional female writers in Medieval France. Her extraordinary oeuvre, proto-feminist, comprises novels, poetry and biography, as well as literary, historical, philosophical, political and religious criticism. The illustrated manuscript of her Collected Works is a treasure in the British Library.^a

Her husband Thomas died in an epidemic, circa 1390, aged 34. Christine was 25, left without inheritance and mired in litigation.

Many of her most original early poems express her mourning. Best known is *Seulete suy et seulete veuil estre* (circa 1395):^b

I am alone and alone I wish to be
 Alone my dearest love left me
 I am alone no partner no husband
 I am alone mournful and angered
 I am alone wasting and wounded
 I am alone lost beyond all
 I am alone without my love.
 I am alone at door or window
 I am alone curled-up in a corner
 I am alone fed by my tears
 I am alone sorrowful or serene
 I am alone nothing suits me more
 I am alone locked in my bedroom
 I am alone without my love.
 I am alone everywhere
 I am alone walking or seated
 I am alone on earth
 I am alone abandoned
 I am alone cast down
 I am alone bathed in tears
 I am alone without my love.
 Envoi
 Princes, now my pain has begun
 I am alone threatened by sorrow
 I am alone darker than dark
 I am alone without my love.

In 1403, Christine introduced her allegorical dream vision on the resolution of warfare, *The long road of learning*¹ (1403), with the lasting consequences of Thomas's death: daily renewed grief, profound mourning, deep sadness, constant tears, joyless and unhappy, gloomy, reclusive, weary and unable to forget Thomas. Later, in *Christine's Vision*² (1405), the principal source of her biography, she adds that she had just cause to feel bitterness in missing his companionship, she had wanted to die, and she decided 'wisely' not to remarry.

Bibliotherapy became her consolation and relief: she studied and wrote to support her large household – three children, her mother and a niece, as well as to distract herself from grief and adversity.

References

- 1 de Pizan C. Le chemin de long estude. In *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan* (eds R Blumenfeld-Kosinski and K Brownlee). WW Norton & Co, 1997.
- 2 de Pizan C. L'avisio de Christine. In *The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan* (eds R Blumenfeld-Kosinski and K Brownlee). WW Norton & Co, 1997.

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^a British Library: Harley MS 4431.

^b Free translation of the original by G.W. Copyrighted translations and recordings are available online.