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# REVIEWS

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Kate Langdon Forhan. *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*.  
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In the preface of her book, Kate Langdon Forhan clearly states that the purpose of her project is to “present the political paradox of Christine” (vi). The rather broad terms “political” and “paradox” beg for clarification in order not to mislead the reader. It must be pointed out that “political” in this case refers in the main to questions of royal leadership and princely behavior with the purpose of instructing political scientists and theorists, especially those concerned with contemporary issues, in the political thought of medieval France (vii). Though the author sporadically mentions Christine de Pizan’s “feminist” politics for instance, these views, though crucial to Christine, are largely omitted from this study with the exception of a brief discussion of the *Livre de la cité des dames* and the *Livre des trois vertus*. Admittedly, a lot has already been done on this topic and perhaps does not need to be taken up here. At the same time, however, by announcing the political theory of Christine in the title of the book, it seems to me that her views of the social function of womanhood undoubtedly ought to be part of it. Christine de Pizan’s works which are the focus of Langdon Forhan’s analysis are predominately *Le Livre des fait et bonnes moeurs du roi Charles V le Sage*, *Le livre de la cité des dames* and the following *Livre des trois vertus*, *Le livre de prod’homielprudence*, *Le livre du corps de policie*, and, more marginally, the later *Livre de la paix*. In line then with her stated objective and her targeted audience, Langdon Forhan succinctly precedes each thematic discussion of Christine’s so-called political works with a socio-political contextualization of the question at hand where she frequently draws parallels between the 15th and 20th/21st centuries. Often, unfortunately, the reader feels wanting: one has the impression that the author but scratches the surface of the respective topic and, to be sure, modernists would require a much more detailed presentation of the social and political circumstances that shaped Christine’s thought.

In my view, what Langdon Forhan calls paradoxical may more appropriately be labeled as multifaceted. For instance, Christine’s views on the role of women are often referred to paradoxically as either progressive and forward-looking or conservative and prudish. This debate reflects perhaps more a paradox of our own

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time as we anachronistically impose our feminist ideas on Christine's writings. Without getting into this debate, it should suffice to say that, though progressive and daring in her writings, Christine nevertheless stayed within the realm of the possible given the limitations for women of her time. Moreover, Christine's political progressiveness and conservatism to which Langdon Forhan alludes in the conclusion reflects perhaps the fledgling humanist thought of the late Middle Ages rather than a paradox in her views. In fact, Langdon Forhan herself attests to Christine's theoretical consistence in the preface of her book as she proposes to offer the reader "a sustained and internally consistent political theory [of Christine], showing both the development and the continuities in her ideas" (vii).

Rather than proceeding chronologically, Langdon Forhan structured her book thematically. After a very general overview of the political turmoil of the waning Middle Ages, she addresses such issues as the origin and evolution of the "mirror for princes" genre which Christine adopts for several of her works, such as *L'Epistre d'Othéa*, *Le Livre des fait et bonnes moeurs du roi Charles V le Sage*, *Le livre de prod'homme/prudence*, *Le livre du corps de policie*, *Le Livre de fais et de chevalrie*, *Le Livre de la paix*, as well as her mirror for women *Le livre des trois vertus*. Langdon Forhan calls this book a mirror for princesses which is imprecise since the advice offered by the four virtues is not only limited to women of the nobility. To this Langdon Forhan adds two other books of instruction, the *Enseignements de Christine à son filz* and the *Proberbes moraux*. For a discussion of the mirror image and its ensuing literary genre Langdon Forhan refers to Ritamary Bradley's influential but dated article in *Speculum*, "Backgrounds of the Title *Speculum* in Medieval Literature" [29 (1954): 100-115]. But Herbert Grabes' *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass: Kontinuität und Originalität der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Literatur des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1973) and even more so Einar M. Jónsson's *Le miroir: Naissance d'un genre littéraire* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1995) may have been more useful and complete sources.

In the next chapter she takes up the symbolically charged image of the body politic continuing the discussion of the sources of the *Livre du corps de policie*, namely John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* and Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* begun in Chapter Two. This is followed by an analysis of Christine's views on kingship, justice, and the law. Here, the author's argument is that Christine had little legal knowledge herself and relied on legal popularizers such as Brunetto Latini and his *Li Livres dou trésor* (c. 1260) as well as on commentators/translators such as Nicole Oresme. Quite disappointingly, the notion of justice is too exclusive and the works discussed too limited. The tripartite division of ratio/aequitas/justitia is

taken up by Christine in the allegories of Reason, Righteousness, and Justice who are the counselors in her diptych the *Livre de la cité des dames* and the *Livre des trois vertus*, and their allegorical connotations are inextricably linked. Rather than merely focusing on the allegory of justice, the author ought to have expanded her analysis to Reason and Righteousness as philosophical pillars of the medieval legal system. Langdon Forhan neglects to include such works as the *Trésor* and, more importantly, the *Débat sur le Roman de la rose*. In the debate epistles in particular Christine explicitly formulates legal arguments for such crimes as rape and defamation. This topic has recently been discussed by Earl Jeffrey Richards in “Christine and Medieval Jurisprudence” (*Contexts and Continuities. Proceedings of the IVth International Colloquium of Christine de Pizan, Vol. III*, Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002: 747-766). Richards argues that by looking at Christine’s legal theories we still have a great deal to learn about her “feminist” politics. In light of these shortcomings, I find rather ill-founded Langdon Forhan’s argument that “Christine de Pizan’s view is that justice is never an exclusively personal virtue; moreover, she does not have a truly substantive view of justice” (119).

The book ends on a chapter on Christine’s theory of peace and just war where Langdon Forhan once more cleverly contextualizes the writer’s views within the more global contemporaneous discussions. Here, the *Livre des trois vertus*, which discusses the importance for diplomacy and pacifism for women, comes to its due recognition. In the conclusion, the author summarizes the various so-called paradoxes in Christine’s theories on the aforementioned topics. I am surprised at Langdon Forhan’s statement that “North Americans and Europeans are by and large shielded from the worst aspects of war” (133). This may be true for North Americans, yet I would like to remind the author of the fairly recent atrocities which took place in the former Yugoslavia, not to mention the fact that in European history, with the exception of the most recent era, the time span between two wars was never greater than fifty years.

To sum up then, Langdon Forhan’s book is undoubtedly an important contribution to “Christine” scholarship, in particular since her political theories as they pertain to the ruling classes have largely been an ignored topic. However, this book could have greatly benefitted from deeper analyses. Given the general overtone of the background information on late medieval social and political history, the audience who will stand to profit most from this work are Christine scholars with sufficient knowledge in her works and those who are already knowledgeable in the socio-political history of late medieval France. ✱