

BOOK REVIEWS

**Kate Langdon Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*.
Hampshire, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002. Pp. xiv + 187.**

Kate Forhan's new study fills a lacuna in an otherwise crowded field of scholarship on one of France's most influential women writers. The study examines an entire sub-corpus of texts that is underrepresented in Christine studies. It includes the biography of *Charles V, Le Livre de Prudence* and/or *Le Livre de la Prod'homie de l'homme, Le Livre du Corps de Policie, Le Livre de fais d'armes et de chevalrie, La Lamentaction sur les maux de la France*, and *Le Livre de la Paix*. As her title makes apparent, Forhan proposes that these works justify a new designation for Christine de Pizan as a political theorist. Forhan is undoubtedly well placed to make such lofty claims in Christine's name and to defend them through careful analysis of the author's engagement with a substantial tradition of political writings. While earlier studies of parts of this corpus have typically concluded that Christine reveals herself to be more of an ethicist, Forhan stakes out new territory, arguing that the originality of these writings can only be appreciated through the lens of political theory.

The study opens with a two-part introduction to Christine and her political writings. Following a biography sketched out in broad strokes, a second chapter provides a sweeping survey of the mirror for princes genre that Christine often adopts for her political commentary. For the Christine scholar, these chapters provide little new information, but for the layperson, they offer a concise introduction to the life and oeuvre of this important writer. In the remaining four chapters, Forhan addresses individually key notions in medieval political theory. They are the body politic (Chapter 3), kingship (Chapter 4), justice and the law (Chapter 5), and peace and just war (Chapter 6). The greatest strength of Forhan's study resides in her systematic effort to provide a context for each of these issues before addressing Christine's uses of her sources and her potential contributions to the field. To situate Christine within the firmly established tradition of political writings, Forhan surveys a vast array of canonical texts by Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Augustine, Bede, John of Salisbury, Aquinas, Gratian, Abelard, Giles of Rome, Robert Pullen, Raoul de Presles, Oresme, Dante Alighieri, Brunetto Latini, and Machiavelli. For readers unfamiliar with medieval political theory, Forhan's discussion of these writers provides a clear, organized, and relevant introduction to each major tenet of medieval political thought. Forhan reiterates throughout her work that Christine's political ideas can only be truly appreciated by first situating her within this larger tradition.

Following this survey of Christine's potential sources, each chapter then turns to the author's corpus. Forhan's findings may disappoint some readers. She concedes on numerous occasions that Christine proves to be either a poor reader or an indifferent reader who fails to grasp the major concepts of her predecessors or who consciously chooses to ignore their overarching arguments. Christine frequently is revealed as possessing an over-simplified understanding of medieval political theory (e.g., 57, 114-15, 127). Forhan also

concedes that Christine proves conservative in her views of government and social hierarchies. She justifies Christine's resistance to change by recalling the political upheaval and social turmoil plaguing late-medieval France. This defense helps shape yet another response to Sheila Delany's' attack on the poet. This reader, at least, was dismayed to find that yet again, so much paper and ink had been dedicated to what remains an ill-informed, anachronistic, and polemical argument that offers little insight into Christine's writings. Delany's greatest contribution to the field was her challenge to scholars to be more tempered in their praise for Christine. The message has been received, Christine scholarship has renewed rigor, and I believe it is time to move on.

Forhan's study is an excellent example of such a tempered approach. She acknowledges Christine's indebtedness to classical and contemporary writers, and she concedes that the author remained conservative in many of her views. Yet Forhan's perceptive and grounded study of Christine's political writings does uncover several original contributions to the field. In particular, we learn that Christine's redefinition of power relations between the Church and the king, her reshaping of prudence, and her just war theory signal important changes in political theory that mark the late-medieval period. In fact, in her most provocative argument, Forhan ruminates in her conclusion on the striking similarities between Christine's political theory and that of Machiavelli. While acknowledging that no evidence points to the subversive Early Modern writer's familiarity with Christine's works, Forhan nevertheless argues that the modern tendency to consider *Il principe* as a radical break with an established mirror tradition is questionable given that some of its more radical ideas, especially the notion of *virtù*, echo concepts developed in Christine's own writings. But the greatest contribution that Christine brings to the field of medieval political discourse, maintains Forhan, is the uniqueness of her stance as a woman who resides outside the power structure. Christine is shown to mix autobiography and theory to offer new insight. She speaks as a "citizen" of France and moreover, as a victim rather than an enforcer of the law. In rejecting a dispassionate approach to discussing politics, Christine provided an informed testimonial that was not only appreciated by her contemporaries, but that should be valued by modern scholars who can discover in her writings a unique vision of late-medieval political theory.

Forhan's passionate and sensitive study of Christine's political writings offers new insight into this much-studied author, and her reflections will certainly serve as a catalyst for further discussion. Indeed, Forhan proves to be an attentive reader of Christine and in the end, she adopts Christine's own strategies. For as Christine approached the staid field of political theory and offered a new angle to examine established ideas, so too Forhan approaches a veritable industry of Christine scholarship by way of an under-explored avenue. The work has the added benefit of offering a concise but comprehensive overview of Christine's life, of medieval political theory, and the history and culture of the Hundred Years War. This attentiveness to context speaks to colleagues in a wide range of fields and even to their students who will find in Forhan's clear writing a wonderful introduction to medieval culture.

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¹ Sheila Delany, "Mothers to Think Back Through: Who are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Cornell University Press, 1987), 177-197.

Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih, eds. *Gender and Holiness: Men, women and saints in late medieval Europe*. London: Routledge, 2002. 200 pages, with illustrations.

Samantha J.E. Riches and Sarah Salih introduce this collection with a story from Gerald of Wales's *Life of St. Gilbert of Sempringham*. In this account, St. Gilbert suppresses carnal desire in one of his nuns by exposing his aged, withered, and scab-covered body to the nuns' gaze while preaching against lust combining "preaching and striptease" to effect. Riches and Salih's discussion of this story acknowledges one of the primary conundrums of the study of gender and religion in the Middle Ages: "it is impossible to discuss this kind of story with any degree of certainty, given the modern commentator's *distance in time and space* in addition to the insurmountable problem of *the impossibility of truly accessing another person's subjective experience*" [emphasis mine] (1). Each author in this collection of scholarly essays, then, grapples with the impossible – to transcend time, space, and experience in order to comprehend "the relationship between gender and religious culture in particular, as well as medieval understandings of belief systems in general" while also acknowledging that "'male' and 'female' are not constants" through time and space (1).

The authors of these essays do something that all of us as scholars should do. They seek meaning through a variety of textual and other physical artifacts, and they do it admirably. Consequently this collection adds to our understanding of how gender and holiness were constructed, perceived, and dealt with in both secular and religious late medieval culture. The authors' attention to "the mutually implicated questions of whether religious practice is inevitably mediated through discourses of gender and whether cultural concepts of gender are inevitably informed by religious sensibilities" (2) is a common thread in the collection.

Jacqueline Murray addresses the meaning of masculinity and the male body in the medieval West. After an excellent overview of recent scholarship in this area, Murray focuses on Peter Abelard and demonstrates the diversity of materials that must be approached to ask how Abelard "as a man, made sense of his experience" (10). Samantha Riches unbalances the "convenient categories" of analysis used to study saints' cults (64) while assessing images of St. George as both virile male warrior and male virgin martyr. She posits "a third indeterminate, perhaps virginal, gender, not...a pseudo-female." The distinction she makes is semantic. St. George, the warrior, is clearly "demasculinised, not feminised" by his martyrdom (75). Katherine Lewis explores late medieval notions of kingship and virginity through Richard II's reconfiguration of himself after the death of Queen Anne focusing primarily on Richard's anxious endeavors to connect himself with the supposedly chastely married Edward the Confessor. Lewis examines textual and visual evidence including the important Wilton Diptych and Richard's carefully prescribed tomb effigy for himself and Queen Anne, "the first double royal tomb ever commissioned in England" (90). Robert