

BOOK REVIEW

The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings

Christine de Pizan. Translated by Ineke Hardy and edited by Sophie Bourgault and Rebecca Kingston. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2018 (ISBN 13: 978-1-62466-729-9)

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In 1404, Christine de Pizan began writing *The City of Ladies*, a book that she hoped would serve as a citadel for women like her, women whom Fortune appeared to have abandoned to a world of misogyny that undermined women's trust in themselves, their virtues, and their ability to reason. In this book, Christine maintains that Reason, Rectitude, and Justice have urged her to create a catalog of stories of heroic women in order that, in knowing them, she and other women might take courage in their own abilities and merits. Her book was meant to be read and internalized as a shield worn upon the heart, protecting women with an invisible fortress as they sought to support themselves, their families, and their nation-states. Christine would no doubt recognize that such armor is still necessary today when women continue to be under-represented in the literary and philosophical canon as well as in the history books, and when women too often remain afraid to raise their voices in protest. Hackett's edition of this work, featuring Ineke Hardy's readable and engaging translation, provides the new student and the established scholar with easy access to Christine's citadel. Furthermore, the Hackett volume gives the reader a suitable introduction to the life, works, and importance of Christine de Pizan's thought.

Sophie Bourgault and Rebecca Kingston's *Introduction* to the volume offers the reader a substantive account of Christine's life in the context of her times and a fine summary of the corpus of her works. In doing so, the editors present Christine to their readers (as Christine presented important women to her readers) in order to cement her place as a foundational figure in the canon. Demonstrating Christine's breadth of knowledge of classical and medieval sources, Bourgault and Kingston ironically spend more time proving that Christine had mastered the canon of male authors she quotes (for example, Augustine, Aristotle, Ovid, Boccaccio, Boethius) than highlighting Christine's insistence on the importance and unique influence of women in poetry, philosophy, science, and politics. Nonetheless, the editors certainly make a robust argument for Christine's importance in a number of areas of study. They explain her role as a medieval gender theorist who advocates for gender neutrality and argues for the full equality of men and women in intellectual ability, courage, chastity, faithfulness, and political virtue, nearly four centuries before Mary Wollstonecraft. They evaluate Christine's theory of ethics that highlights the beauty of chastity and loyalty

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in loving relationships and also the need for reason alongside bravery in advocating for justice and peace. Most clearly, they advocate for Christine's political theory that the community is a body where every part is necessary, along with her resulting admonitions that husbands listen more to the advice of their wives and that all men and women listen more intently to the voices of women in order that families and nations might better prosper in peace.

The editors' timeline of Christine's life and works is helpful to the reader interested in putting her ideas in the context of her times. The events that influenced her are delineated along with those events that she herself influenced, marking her as an obviously important political thinker in her time. The suggestions for further reading provide a strong list of secondary sources. Unfortunately, the reader who wants to know where Christine found her information will find the list of her sources to be a little thin and completely devoid of any classical or medieval female scholars, although it seems from her texts that Christine was reading classical works by women and communicating with her female contemporaries. Perhaps new scholarship and research will enable a fuller bibliography in a later, updated edition of this work.

As for Christine's works themselves, the editors made insightful choices in the excerpts that preface and conclude this volume, creating a book that fully explains the need for the *City of Ladies* in Christine's age and in our own. The volume begins with excerpts from part III of *Christine's Vision*, which contain Christine's appeal concerning the delights of reading and learning as well as her complaints concerning her circumstances as a young mother and widow perpetually in court trying to protect her children and her assets from those who considered her an easy target of manipulation and fraud. In these excerpts, Christine portrays Lady Philosophy as a divine being who offers comfort by reminding her that as a Christian she can trust in God's providence rather than worry about the fickleness of Fortune, and that as a philosopher she can trust in her intellectual abilities to overcome adversity rather than submit to despair. Though Lady Philosophy spoke similarly to Boethius, Christine's work makes clear that this message is for women in particular who have talents equal to men's but who are rarely offered access to the joys of philosophy and its hope in providence.

The main work of the volume, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, is beautifully translated. Having studied and taught this work numerous times, reading this translation was a richer experience for me than any previous one. Hardy's translation of Christine's prose, printed in the readable font and sectioning that makes Hackett editions the teacher's preferred choice, engages the reader, who finds herself chuckling at Christine's clever ironic twists of language, considering the merits of her thoughtful meditations on the virtues of women, and repeating to all who will listen the wonderful stories of heroines throughout the ages. The stories are the main event. Christine tells the tales of women from every region of the world as she knew it and from the most ancient times to her own era. Remarkably, and unfortunately, more than six centuries after Christine's *City of Ladies* was published, twenty-first-century students are likely to be hearing some of these stories for the first time. It is unlikely that students, or even their teachers, will know of the fifth-century BCE painter Thamaris, the fourth-century poet Proba of Rome, or the many queens who held power in Europe, such as the sixth century's Queen Fredegund, the twelfth century's Queen Blanche of Castille, or the fourteenth century's Queen Isabeau of Bavaria. Moreover, Christine provides fresh details about better known women, such as the Greek philosopher poet Sappho, Socrates' unfairly maligned wife Xanthippe, the patron saint of philosophers

Catherine of Alexandria, and the educated and wise wives of Scipio Africanus, Seneca, and various Roman senators and emperors.

Christine's *City of Ladies* is fortified not only with narratives of historical women but also with accounts from myths and legends. Ops, Isis, Minerva, the sibyls of ancient Greece, the Amazons, the Sabine women, and Dido, queen of Carthage, stand like superheroes throughout the text, inspiring the reader with their epic courage and power. Biblical heroines are similarly larger than life in their strength and courage: Esther, Susannah, Judith, and Mary Magdalene are only a few of those highlighted. In contrast to these women's might, Christine also presents long, detailed iconographies of virgin martyrs who conquered their enemies through their joyful submission to suffering and death, a submission, like Christ's, that ultimately undermined the authority of their oppressors. By the end of the *City of Ladies*, the reader has not only acquired a bevy of literary heroines and a catalog of historical woman wonders, but the reader feels herself empowered with new strength, courage, and trust in her sex and in herself. Feeling transformed by these stories, the reader will be able to do what Christine admonishes women they must do: reason and speak in order to serve their communities justly.

Bourgault and Kingston's volume thus follows the *City of Ladies* with Christine's political advice in excerpts from *The Book of the Body Politic*. On one hand, this *Book* begins as a mirror for princes dedicated to the Dauphin, Louis of Guyenne. On the other hand, the theory of the book requires that the audience include not only royalty but knights, nobles, and all common people, for every member of the body serves a purpose for the whole. Although this theory is similar to that in other works, from Aristotle's *Politics* to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Christine's take was important in her era when the role of the king in society was in particular question. In our era too, when liberal philosophy's idealization of the individual reigns, Christine's position feels fresh rather than medieval as she reminds her reader that because humans flourish only in peaceful relationship, they are indeed stronger when they work together.

Importantly, this volume concludes with excerpts from *Lamentation on France's Ills* in which Christine cries out her anxiety for peace and well-being for the people of France. Throughout the corpus of Christine's works, especially those highlighted in this volume, Christine advocates that all people cry out for justice. She praises women who used noisy tears to bring their rapists to trial and who sang hymns to bring their torturers to conversion. She encourages wives to speak out to save their husbands from bad decisions and to save nations from the poor choices of rulers. She advocates the need to speak the truth clearly to those in power and inspires confidence in women, in the poor, and in all those whose voices are marginalized. By ending the volume with Christine's cry to the kingdom of France, the editors remind the reader that the time to speak and demand to be heard is the present, and that the duty to speak is the duty of all who recognize the importance and power of their own voices.

Hackett's new edition of *The Book of the City of Ladies and Other Writings* of Christine de Pizan features the most readable and engaging translation of the work on the American market today. The volume is an important contribution to Hackett's collection of philosophical works and will make teaching Christine as part of the canon of political science, ethics, and gender studies much easier than ever before. If there is a revision of the edition, it ought to include more substantial citations and notes, as this book is an important opportunity to introduce new readers not only to Christine but to the women she wished to bring forward. In this edition some citations are given, but each woman's story requires footnotes with references and cross

references to other medieval or ancient sources that mention her. As it is, the interested reader will find this volume provides a solid introduction to the life and thought of Christine de Pizan. Time spent inside the citadel of this book will fortify the reader with the histories and legends of women of power and wisdom so that she might ride with courage to speak out against misogyny, knowing that she is backed by Amazons and Roman poets, by medieval queens and powerful saints, and by Reason, Rectitude, and Justice.

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