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► **To cite this version:**

Aude Mairey. Pizan, Christine of. Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy, 2021, pp.1-4. 10.1007/978-94-007-6730-0\_954-1 . halshs-03830485

**HAL Id: halshs-03830485**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03830485>**

Submitted on 6 Oct 2023

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## **Pizan, Christine of**

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### **Introduction**

Christine of Pizan (c.1365-c.1430) is the first feminine author who managed to earn a living from his pen at the end of the Middle Ages; she wrote many “autobiographical” passages that inform our knowledge of her life.

The range of her works is immense and some enjoyed a great popularity. Some scholars consider her as a “proto-feminist” but she is also a political thinker, although the controversies about what she really thought are numerous, all the more so as the scholarship on her has grown exponentially these last four decades.

Christine’s father was Thomas of Pizzano, a physician and astrologer who studied and lectured at the University of Bologna before going to Venice in 1356, where she was born. In the middle of the 1360s, he was invited by the French king Charles V the Wise (m. 1380) to come in Paris. He became one of his physician and counselor. His family joined him at the end of 1368 or at the beginning of 1369 but Christine of Pizan never forgot her Italian origins. Nevertheless, she was nurtured in the intellectual circle surrounding the king. In 1379 or 1380, she married Etienne de Castel who became secretary of the king in 1381; this allowed her to stay close to the royal circles. She gave him three children and their marriage was a happy one. But the misfortunes fell several years later: her father died in 1387 and her husband in 1390. At the age of 25, Christine of Pizan was a young widow in charge of her children but also of her mother and a niece. She decided not to marry again, which was unusual. It took her more than ten years to solve financial difficulties and find a suitable position in society, even if old friends of his father helped her. It is during this difficult period that she began to write love poetry, which established her reputation as a courtly writer. Her first “published” work, the *Hundred Ballads*, dates from 1399. In the next decades, she enjoyed a thorough patronage of the greats, men and women, until her retirement at the abbey of Poissy at the end of the 1410s.

### **An Autodidact**

If Christine of Pizan has written much love poetry at the beginning of her career to alleviate, she tells us, the sorrow she felt after her husband’s death, she had far more ambitions and constructed her own intellectual instruction at a time when women were excluded from university and other centers of learning. Nevertheless, it seems likely that she had access to the

great library of the king constituted for its main part by Charles V – one of the greatest of Europe. She read ancient history, encyclopedias, scientific and philosophical writings, didactic and political treatises and, of course, poetry. The major part of her readings was certainly in French – many translations of “classics” she used, from Aristotle to Augustine and Boethius, from Valerius Maximus to Cicero, and so on, had been commanded by Charles V and the Valois family. She also knew the major Italian authors – Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch – who had a major influence on her. And of course, she knew the Scriptures well. Besides French and Italian (his maternal language), there is a recent consensus on the fact that she also knew Latin well enough. Even if, in the same way as most of her contemporaries, she used compilations and florilegia, it is evident that Christine of Pizan acquired a vast culture and she applied his many readings to the comprehension of the troubled times in which she lived.

### **Politics: a Practical Philosophy**

The first work of Christine of Pizan not on love was a didactic text named the *Epistle of Othea*, released in 1400 or 1401. The goddess of Prudence, Othea, an invention, writes advice to Prince Hector of Troy, aged fifteen. Some recurrent preoccupations already appear: the necessity of advice and education, the articulation between ancient history and Christian wisdom to address the contemporary problems of her time, the philosophical importance of the Aristotelian concept of Prudence and the defense of women. This work was instantly very popular. Between 1400 and 1414, Christine wrote a considerable amount of works – didactical, political, allegorical... – first in verse, then in prose. In all her writings, she addresses the contemporary society and its troubles, mainly the consequences of the madness of the king Charles VI (m. 1422) and the French civil war between Armagnac and Burgundian (1407-1435). Most of her texts are dedicated to princes and princess, actors of the conflict: the dukes of Orléans and Burgundy, the queen Isabeau of Bavaria, the Dauphin Louis of Guyenne and his wife, and so on. If it was once said that she sided with the Burgundian party, it is recognized now that she did not choose a faction but tried to mend the French divisions.

Her first main works are in verse: *The Road of the Long Study* (1402-1403), *The Book of the Mutation of Fortune* (1403) and *The Advison Christine* (1405) are initiatory dream-poems in which we find the most important “autobiographical” passages. Christine travels and meets several allegories – Reason, Philosophy, Noblesse, Chivalry but also France who presses her to warn her compatriots on the dangers of division. These works also insist on the importance of philosophy, mainly Aristotelian in inspiration. In 1403, Philip the Bold asked her to write a biography of Charles V, *The Book of the Deeds and Good Mores of Charles V*, original in the way that it is divided in three parts,

Noblesse, Chivalry and Wisdom. These notions structure the presentation of the life of the beloved king, which is constantly presented as an example compared to ancient worthy figures. The concept of Prudence – practical wisdom or wisdom in action according to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas – is central to this panegyric, also a mirror for princes. Among other major works in prose are *The Book of the Body Politic*, in which she deploys the metaphor of the organic body invented by John of Salisbury, insisting on the functional dimension of this well-known image and providing a vivid portrait of French society. There is also *The Book of Peace* (1413-1414), which meditates notably on the problems of tyranny and popular revolts; or *The Book of Deeds of Arms and Chivalry* (1410), a theoretical and practical treatise on war.

In all these works, Christine tries to present some major principles of government grounded on virtues such as love, justice, prudence and wisdom, but always in regards to contemporary problems of her country. Nevertheless, she defends, as her predecessors like Giles of Rome, a hierarchical society and a strong monarchy.

Her originality resides mainly in his implementation of a practical philosophy that could help to establish harmony, in her usage of ancient history and in her shrewd perception of the troubles of the times.

### **An Advocate of Women**

This is another originality of Christine of Pizan. In 1401-1402, she was caught in the famous “Quarrel of the Rose”.

Through a series of epistles and treatises, she fought against some celebrated French humanists, Gontier and Pierre Col, and Jean of Montreuil, about the misogyny of the French best seller *Romance of the Rose*. She had already condemned the mischief of the men in an early poem, the *Epistle of the God of Love* (1399) but the quarrel probably led her to a more profound reflection on the place and status of women in two of her most popular works, *The City of Ladies* (1404-1407) and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* (1405). *The City* is an allegorical work in which Reason, Rectitude and Justice guide Christine for the building of a city meant to shelter all the worthy ladies, under the queenship of the Virgin. Inspired especially by Boccaccio and Augustine, the allegory is the occasion to discuss the contribution of women through human history and to show that they are as capable as men in intellect, reason and moral. *The Treasure* is more pragmatic, very close in its structure to the *Book of the Body Politic* with its three parts respectively devoted to princess (with an accent put on their search for peace and intercessory role), women of middle and of laborious class, again with a sense of vividness and realism.

Christine of Pizan is not a feminist in the modern sense of the term: she constantly defends

women and recognizes for them a place in the public sphere, but she does not equate them with men. Nevertheless, her confidence in the capacities of women appears with a strong emotional stance in her last work, on Joan of Arc (1429).

## **Conclusion**

Christine of Pizan was an extraordinary woman, but a woman of her times. She was effectively the first feminine author and she was very conscious of it, for she created a complex persona and means of authorizing her works. She also published it, by copying numerous manuscripts and this contributed to her huge popularity in France, but also in England and other European countries. More than 200 manuscripts, numerous translations and printed editions subsist. Christine was a political thinker in the full sense of the term even if she was not a revolutionary and a modern feminist, as some scholars have argued. She made a huge contribution to the political and social culture of her time. The breadth of her work (also in matters of instruction, love and devotion) is exceptional and appeals to all readers interested in late medieval society and culture.

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