

Notes on Christine de Pizan

1. The Body Politic
 - a. In describing the makeup of the body politic, Christine tells us she is exploring the realm of virtue and manners. Would we say “manners” falls into under the purview of political theory at this point?
 - b. The body politic consists of three estates:
 - i. Princes
 - ii. Nobles (‘Knights’)
 - iii. General Population
 - c. All three of these estates must work together within the Body Politic, which must be a unity of many parts, just like a run-of-the-mill body:
 - i. Princes—the Head (in control)
 - ii. Nobles—the Arms & Hands (the force)
 - iii. People—legs & feet (their labour sustains)
 1. People also belly: the hand and arms procure sustenance for the popular belly—i.e., the common good
2. Princes
 - a. As the head of the body, the moral health of the prince is paramount. A virtuous prince leads to a virtuous body politic. We thus have a vested interest in making princes virtuous. That means we have a vested interest in the education of young princes.
 - b. So: how shall we educate young princes?
 - i. Piety comes first. A Prince must know how to pray.
 - ii. Morals and manners must be inculcated.
 - iii. It would be ideal if scientific and philosophical training could be included.
 - iv. However, the princes of the fourteenth century do not want to learn such arcane things.
 - v. There will be few Aristotles for our Alexanders.
 - vi. In light of that, we must focus on taking what we can get: that is, moral and pious upbringings for our princes.
 - c. Along with a tutor, every young future prince needs an older Knight who will take him under his supervision. Christine’s notion of the training of rulers is thoroughly embedded in the codes of chivalry, which even by her time were on the wane. The English would lay much of the commonly accepted opinions about knighthood to rest on the battlefields of Crécy and Agincourt. But the ideals of chivalry were still alive for Christine, and they would continue to shape her sense of ideal rulership.
 - i. For Christine, the moral virtues and chivalric values go hand in hand. Goodness comes along with chivalry, honour, bravery, courage, and every other quality befitting a knight. She seems to have few concerns that chivalric values might conflict with some of the moral ideals of a political leader. This contrasts her with certain Christian authors of late antiquity, who would be much more concerned about the possibility that a knightly desire for honour might get in the way of a purely moral disposition.

- d. The virtues of the prince:
 - i. Piety
 - 1. But not long withdrawn bouts of prayer.
 - 2. Rather: active good deeds out in the world
 - ii. Love of the Common Good
 - 1. Circumscribed by national borders.
 - 2. Patriotism for the people.
 - iii. Love of Justice
 - 1. Equitable relations with all.
 - 2. Thought not quite egalitarianism...
- e. Church & State (Virtue 1)
 - i. The pious prince must hold the clergy to standards.
 - ii. It's not right to hand out prebends left and right, with no concern for how clerical individuals conduct themselves morally.
 - iii. Yet that is precisely what Christine thinks is happening.
 - iv. She imagines an alternative situation, in which only morally abstemious clergy would be elevated in position.
 - v. She points out that even the pagans of old held themselves to standards of moral virtue, especially when it came to their priests.
 - vi. The pious prince should also impose strict religious laws.
 - vii. Atheism should be outlawed and vigorously punished.
 - viii. The same goes for swears invoking the names of God.
 - ix. If the prince cultivates piety in this manner, he can reasonably expect to be favoured by God 'both in soul and body.'
 - x. (Princely prosperity gospel?)
- f. Shepherding the People (Virtue 2)
 - i. Christine invokes the well-worn model of the 'shepherd and his flock' to describe the proper relationship between prince and people.
 - ii. But she takes a rather militaristic approach to this imagery.
 - iii. The shepherd must not only care for his flock, but must first and foremost protect them from the dangerous wolves out there.
 - iv. So:
 - 1. The Prince is the Shepherd
 - 2. His Knights are the Sheep-Dogs
 - 3. The People are the Sheep
 - v. If the dogs attack the sheep, the shepherd must beat them back.
 - vi. If the soldiers attack the people, the prince must maintain order.
 - vii. Aiming for the public good of the flock also demands a number of traditional virtues from the prince: liberal generosity; pity; humane clemency; equanimity amidst the vacillations of history; an ability to separate accomplishment from good fortune; a concomitant resistance to pride.
 - 1. (In this and other passages, Christine relies heavily on exempla drawn from the folksy hero tales of the first-century Valerius, whose goal had been to produce a sycophantic ode to Tiberius. To her credit, she acknowledges how extreme her reliance is. Her reason for it is that Valerius does a uniquely excellent job of demonstrating that even civic leaders can be accorded honour for their virtue, rather than simply for their wealth, etc.)

2. (Like Dante, then, Christine is a great fan of the ancient Romans, despite their lack of Christianity. Dante had a rather idealistic portrait of imperial virtue. Christine focuses less on imperial politics (lest she be taken for an HRE-sympathizer), more on the perfection of virtue ethics within a civic context, as she sees that developing in ancient Rome.)
 - g. Love of Justice (Virtue 3)
 - i. The last of the three princely virtues is, of course, the love and maintenance of justice in his lands.
 - ii. But what is justice?
 - iii. Simple: justice is a measure which renders to each what is due.
 - iv. Christine is quite satisfied with parroting the most basic Aristotelian definition of justice she can find.
 - v. She says that she's discussed the theme more extensively in her book on human wisdom. Justice is a philosophical topic, whereas this is more of a political handbook.
 - vi. She wants to rush on to the examples for why justice should be kept by the prince at all times. All about the exempla, all about Valerius.
 - vii. Christine, invoking the ancients as usual, calls for a renewed dedication of rulers to the rigors of justice, even above commitments to fidelity & family.
 - viii. The rigors of justice extend also to law enforcement.
 - ix. To give to each his due means also to give the evil their punishment.
 - x. Furthermore, the just prince must be feared. (cf. Machiavelli)
 - xi. For the enforcement of justice requires fear. Obedience requires fear.
 - h. Other Princely Advice
 - i. The prince should surround himself with skilled advisors and councillors. They should be trained not just in the political arts, but also in more arcane fields. Christine is utterly convinced that legitimately practiced astrology would be a huge boon to governance.
 - ii. The good prince would also be prudent, well-spoken, respectful of the knights under his command, and so on. He must practice and attain self-mastery, for how can he justly control his territory if he cannot judiciously control himself? If the prince accomplishes all this, he would be justly deserving of praise and glory. Chasing praise and glory for its own sake may not be good, but earnestly receiving it in good faith is a fair prize for a prince.
 - iii. Christine thus ends on a rather optimistic note. Perhaps the ideal prince could, like Julius Caesar of old, combine virtue with glory so seamlessly as to receive even deification upon death.
 - iv. With that, Christine ends her section on princes. It takes up half of the entire work, leaving less room for her to deal with the knightly and popular segments of society.
3. Knightly Nobles
 - a. The noble classes, handmaidens to the princely rulers, should participate in much of the same virtue that was outlined for the princes above. This is part of the reason why the sections on the populace and the nobility are shorter: all should participate in similar virtues, which means that an ethical overview serves just as well for any class.

- b. However, that does not mean that each class should act in identical fashion. Certainly, one wouldn't want the general populace to act like a mob of princes! And so we must still treat of the nobles and populace distinctly, in order to discuss the respective roles they should play in the divinely mandated order of a feudal class society.
 - c. The social role of the nobleman combines military capability with cultured competence. Christine recommends rather stern upbringing methods, since the nobleman will have enough chances to engage with luxury once he's raised. Better to raise him as if he were below his station rather than drench his childhood in opulence.
 - d. Historical query: in what world would it make sense to root the Bildung of medieval knights in exempla drawn from the ancient Roman world, even the Republic? Were these really comparable modes of elite governance? Would a Roman aristocrat find familiarity with a French knight—or vice versa?
 - e. Six Noble Virtues:
 - i. Love of Arms
 - ii. Boldness
 - iii. Mutual Encouragement
 - iv. Fidelity
 - v. Desire for Honour
 - vi. Cunning
 - f. One of Christine's tallest orders here is to clarify how it can be the case that the Christian knight can chase glory without committing himself to sinful vanity. Here she herself even admits that she's disagreeing with Boethius (among others). But she rests on a distinction between the contemplative and the active life. For those engaged in the active life, virtue can allow for an aspect of glory-seeking, insofar as glory-seeking redounds to the benefit of the six noble virtues (many of which are baldly militaristic).
 - g. Christine skates on similarly thin moral ice when she claims that subtle tricks are sometimes good and profitable. She spends a whole three chapters aiming to carve out some room for ethical flexibility on this front. The Christian knight, in her view, is fully permitted to engage in deception, provided that the militaristic aims of that deception are sound. One wants to avoid sounding too reductive here, but do not the sombre tones of Machiavelli ring dimly throughout these pages?
4. The People
- a. Last, and most certainly least, we come to the common masses. They are the legs, the feet, and even the belly of the body politic. Maintaining the bodily metaphor, Christine now argues that the most important thing for the body is that all its parts work together. If any part is out of sync with any other, social discord may arise. For the people, then, it is clear that the legs must be legs, the feet feet, the belly a belly.
 - b. Theoretically, of course, this is supposed to go both ways. If the head (prince) demands too much of the body (politic), then the body will starve. If the body rebels against the head, similar discord will result. And, as Sallust reminds us, concord builds things up bit by bit, while discord tears the greatest of things right apart.
 - c. Given this extensive body metaphor, we must ask: which is the best form of government? There are many options, as has been observed from Plato and Aristotle onward. On Christine's reading, Aristotle was right to assert that the "polity of one" (monarchy) was the best form of governance. Aristocratic rule by the few was a fair

alternative, though not quite as effective as monarchy. Rule by the many was not to be pursued, on account of the overwhelming diversity of opinions and desires. And so the people must accept monarchical rule for the sake of the health of the body politic as a whole.

- d. So: how much obedience do the people owe to their princely head? In short: they owe it all. Christine adduces evidence from both history and Scripture to that effect. Paul, on her reading, commands nothing less than full obedience to the worldly powers that be.
- e. It turns out that the final class of society, The People, is further subdivided into three estates: the clergy; the mercantile bourgeoisie; and 'the rest.'
- f. To the clergy, Christine responds with nothing but praise. Her take on the clergy is extremely academic. She has in mind the faculty of the University of Paris, for starters. For the most part, she uses these passages to pile up praiseworthy exempla drawn from the annals of philosophical greatness. There doesn't seem to be too much of a concern that the clerics might grow troublesome in their curiosity.
- g. To the bourgeoisie, Christine offers mild praise for their functionality, tempered by advice for them not to ally with the popular masses. The bourgeoisie's positive function is to administer commerce in the city for the benefit of the body politic as a whole. They run into trouble when they try to play the People off against the princes.
 - i. Do we see here an anticipation of the Marxist reading of the late feudal period? As the bourgeoisie emerges as a proper class, they aim to improve their own position by playing the old guard (the nobles) off against the masses (the People). This maneuver, while not noble in and of itself, can indeed produce revolutionary effects. In other words: the self-interest of the bourgeoisie drives them to undermine the previous class system, thereby creating the conditions for their own eventual overthrow by the proletariat. [What is the status of Christine-Marx scholarship? Room for growth?]
- h. The labourers, finally, are subdivided into two groups: the skilled artisans and the simple workers. The skilled artisans attain their elevation by participating, ever so slightly, in the higher sciences. Even if they do not fully grasp the truths of Euclid's geometry, their work participates in that reality by bringing aspects of it to fulfillment in the material realm. The simple workers, meanwhile, are nostalgically romanticized by Christine. She lauds them for provided the basis on which society can occur. This is why they are the legs and feet of the body politic.
- i. The great virtue of the labouring class, for Christine, is that they have a much better chance of attaining salvation. What they lack in this-worldly happiness they more than make up for in pious simplicity. Of course, this is the kind of thing one might say if one wanted to ensure a lack of transformational change in this-worldly social affairs. But there is little surprising in that.
- j. Finally, Christine ends on a pious note. She asks for the princes, the nobles, and all three of the popular estates to pray for her, should they have found anything of value in her exemplary tome.
- k. So:
 - i. Does Christine have a political theory as such?
 - ii. Is the organic model of the body politic a plausible hypothesis?
 - iii. Can we see the seeds of late feudalism in Christine?
 - iv. Can we see a reckoning of the noblesse with the bourgeoisie, as well?
 - v. In how many ways does Christine anticipate Machiavelli?