The Body Politic in the Social and Political Thought of Christine de Pizan (Abridged Version)
Part II: Social Inequality and Social Justice

Stephen H. Rigby
Abstract: Just as Christine de Pizan’s political theory sought to reconcile the need for inequality and deference within the political order with the ideals of reciprocity and mutuality, so her broader social theory was very like that of earlier thinkers in stressing the need for each group within the existing social hierarchy to perform its own particular functions for the good of the body politic as a whole. This social outlook was implicitly based on the Aristotelian notion of “distributive justice” which argues that while all members of society are entitled to receive their proper due, this due is itself profoundly unequal, being determined by the hierarchical status of each particular social group. Where Christine’s outlook was most original was in its insistence on women’s intelligence and virtue and in the artistic means by which she was able to present afresh to her audience ideas about society with which they were already very familiar.

Résumé : La pensée politique de Christine de Pizan, qui s’efforçait de concilier la nécessité de l’inégalité et de la déférence dans l’ordre politique avec les idéaux de la réciprocité et de la solidarité, va de pair avec sa pensée sur la société en général qui, renouant avec celle de ses prédécesseurs, insiste sur le devoir de chaque membre de la hiérarchie sociale en vigueur de jouer son propre rôle afin d’assurer le bon fonctionnement du corps de police en son entier. Cette pensée en matière de société se calquerez implicitement sur l’idée aristotélicienne de la « justice distributive », idée selon laquelle tous les membres de la société ont droit à leur propre part, mais que cette part est elle-même profondément inégale car elle dépend du statut hiérarchique de chaque groupe social en question. Là où la pensée de Christine se révèle vraiment originale c’est plutôt dans l’importance qu’elle accorde à l’intelligence et à la vertu des femmes ainsi que dans les moyens discursifs dont elle s’est servie afin de renouveler à l’intention de son lectorat des idées qui leur étaient déjà assez familières.

Christine’s Social Theory

The social orders: reciprocity and hierarchy

Part One of this article argued that although many scholars have emphasised the originality and inclusivity of Christine de Pizan’s political outlook, her political theory was actually, in offering an account of the body politic in terms of both reciprocity and inequality, very similar in its basic principles (and even in much of its detail) to that

---

1 Part I of this article appeared in the previous issue of the CRMH. A longer version of the text of this article, which includes more detailed references to the primary sources and to the secondary literature, also appears in the electronic version of this journal. References to works which are given in full in Part I are given in abbreviated form in Part II, below.

Cahiers de Recherches Médiévales et Humanistes, 25, 2013
Journal of Medieval and Humanistic Studies
found in the works of earlier political philosophers, such as John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome, with which she was familiar. However, as we shall see below, Christine’s conception of political life was, in turn, only one expression of a much broader social outlook, one which, like her political philosophy, combined the ideals of unity and mutuality within society with the need for hierarchy and deference. To what extent did Christine’s social theory, in particular her account of the worth and social role of particular estates, including the peasants, nobles, townspeople, clergy and women, differ from that of earlier thinkers? How was she able to reconcile a belief in social equity and justice with the need for hierarchy and obedience?

In many ways, Christine’s social outlook was an extremely traditional one, being based on the principle that everyone within society should work hard at their calling for the good of the whole. Like the members of a body, each estate had the responsibility to carry out its “own part” for the common good so that “nobles do as nobles should” and “the populace does as is appropriate for them”, each serving in “whatever office God has placed them”, the clergy pursuing their studies and performing divine service, the merchants attending “to their merchandise, the artisan to their craft [and] the labourers to the cultivation of the earth”, this latter task being the “most necessary” of any of the members of the body politic (BP/LCP: I: 10-11; II: 1; III: 8; III: 10). Once society was organised in this way, “everything will be in its proper place, without anything encroaching unreasonably upon anything else” (BP: II: 1; III: 10, 40). Like Gerson in his sermon Vivat Rex, Christine followed Boethius in citing the divinely-ordained harmony of the universe, with its “good proportion, concord and peace”, as a model for the love that should exist within human communities (BP: III: 2, 6, 9). As a result, while people should not seek to rise above their station in life, neither should they be degraded below it. Rather the estates are “honoured” when they are maintained “in their degree”. Accordingly, rather than seeing labour and toil as simply a punishment with which mankind had been cursed after its expulsion from Paradise (Genesis 3: 17), Christine taught that the office of labour was “acceptable” to God. Even before the Fall, God had put Adam in the Garden of Eden “to work, cultivate and take care of it” (Genesis 2: 15) whilst many of the Old Testament patriarchs were “cultivators of the earth and shepherds of beasts”. (BP/LCP: I: 1; III: 1; III: 8-10; MF: 4071-4128, 5131-6580; BP: III, 2, 6, 9). Of course, Christine’s emphasis on the need to respect each estate so long as it performed its function for the social whole was hardly new, having long been the basis of medieval social theory. As John of Salisbury had said, it is wrong to despise the poor and the enslaved since “the whole race of men upon the earth arose from the same origin, consists of and is sustained by the same elements, draws the same breath from the same source, delights in the same heavens, lives the same, and dies the same” whilst, in general, “the road to salvation is safest for whoever is free of riches and other material possessions” (Pol: VIII: 12 (p. 183).


3 Duby, The Three Orders, passim.
The Body Politic in the Social and Political Thought of Christine

The ordered hierarchy which was Christine’s social ideal was, as we have seen, exactly the model of social organisation which the organic analogy, with its equation of the rightful structure of society with the naturally-given, hierarchical ordering of the human body, was traditionally supposed to convey. Thus, it was not particularly significant that Christine’s equation of particular orders of society with specific bodily members sometimes diverged from that of other medieval thinkers, amongst whom there was certainly no unanimity on such matters. After all, Christine’s own accounts of the body politic themselves differ from text to text in terms of the details of which estate should be associated with which particular bodily limb or member. For instance, while her Livre du corps de poliege equates the arms and hands of the body with the nobles and knights, and likens the burgurers and the merchants to its belly, her Livre de paix compares the lords to the shoulders and upper parts of the body, the knights to the arms, the loins and belly to the burgurers, and the merchants to the thighs: only the parallel of the prince with the head and of the common people with the legs and feet remained the same in both works (BBP/LCP: I: 1; II: 1; III: 1; III: 9; BP: III: 6). The detail of such differences was not particularly important since the main purpose of the organic analogy was not empirical description but normative prescription. The metaphor of the body politic was not intended to illustrate how society was actually structured but rather to teach a lesson about the basic principles by which it should ideally be arranged and, in particular, about the need to combine a reciprocal interdependence of the body’s members with the hierarchical subordination of the lower to the higher members if the health of the whole was to be maintained.

However, while Christine saw an inequality of “degree” as being essential to a stable polity, she also recognised that Christ’s teaching that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor, who are blessed “in spirit”, and his claim that “a rich man can no more enter paradise than a laden camel can go through the eye of a needle” (Matthew 5: 3; 19: 24) could be interpreted as a critique of such inequality and of the privileges enjoyed by the rich and powerful. Anticipating this objection, Christine responded that Christ’s words did not mean that it was impossible for the rich person to be saved but rather that they applied only to the “person who has riches without virtues and who does not distribute his riches in alms and in good deeds”. If someone is virtuous, he or she becomes “poor of spirit and will possess the Kingdom of Heaven”. After all, Christine argued, was there not a “great host of kings and princes in heaven”, such as St Louis of France, who had enjoyed wealth, honour and power in this world? “At every level of society, anyone who wants can be saved for the rank does not cause damnation but rather not knowing how to use it wisely”. Therefore, Christine did not teach that wealth “can be obtained only at the

---

expense of others” or claim that possessing worldly riches renders salvation inherently problematic but rather condemned those who love such riches excessively. Christine thus took the current structure of society for granted. Accordingly, she urged peasant women to remind their husbands that when they are working for someone else, they should labour “as well and as faithfully as if they were doing it for themselves”. They should not defraud their masters when they pay their rents, cut down timber from somebody else’s forest without permission or deceive their masters about their rightful pay since if they do such things “they will be damned”. Similarly, while noblewomen should be compassionate to the poor, they should also ensure, when supervising their estates, that they are not tricked by their tenants and labourers but should supervise their workers so that they do not slacken, whilst in the winter-time they should take advantage of the fact that labour is less in demand and so “is cheap”. For Christine, social unity could be achieved, despite the social divisions created by the diversity of ranks and of occupations, by the rich supporting the poor through bearing their share of taxation and through giving charity to the needy, and by the labourers working truly to support the body politic of which they were the feet. While recommending charity on the part of the rich, she also enjoined patience on the part of those who suffer poverty, hunger and misery on Earth so that they may achieve the joy of salvation in the next world where they would “lack for nothing” (TCL: I: 3; I: 5-6; I: 9; I: 11; I: 16; I: 18; I: 22; II: 10; III: 1; III: 3; III: 12-13; LTV: I: 4; I: 6-7; I: 10; I: 12; I: 17; I: 19; I: 23; II: 10; III: 1; III: 3; III: 12-13; BP: III: 26, 45). As Christine had argued in Boethian fashion in her Livre de l’advision Cristine, our sufferings and sorrows are actually blessings in disguise since through them we acquire self-knowledge and are helped on the path to eternal happiness (LAC/VCP: III: 15-26). Once more, for Christine, the virtues of reciprocity and interdependence within society also went hand in hand with the need for inequality and hierarchy as part of the order that God has established within the world.

Indeed, Christine not only argues that members of the nobility can achieve salvation but, at times, even seems to argue for their moral superiority. In the Livre de paix, Christine began from the orthodox Christian premise that all humans are “equal in terms of creation and birth” and that it is better to be humble but virtuous than to be of noble birth and yet act basely. Nevertheless, she then went on to argue, as had Giles of Rome, that, in fact, God has willed that there should be those marked out by their noble lineage amongst whom “by long habit of difference in rank, the practice of a distinct kind of greatness of spirit from that found in others becomes second nature. Or it should do so, for those who fail in this regard dishonour their ancestry. This is shown by the beasts and birds: some are noble and others not” (GKP: 280-2; 333: LGR: 261-3; 310; BP: III: 10). Thus while elsewhere, depending upon her immediate didactic and rhetorical aims, Christine highlighted the goodness of the (humble) poor or the reasonableness of the middle classes, when defending

---

the privileges of the nobility, she presents this group as possessing a superior “greatness of spirit”. As a result of this superiority, the other social orders should defer to them, being “humble” beneath the rule of their superiors and working hard in their estate (BP: II: 1; III: 10, 40). Doubtless, when selecting a constable to lead his army, a king should pay more attention to a man’s skill at arms and character than to his lineage or blood but, nevertheless, “if both were found in the same person, it would be very useful” since “the nobler the blood, the greater the esteem in which he would be held … a quality necessary to every leader” (BDAC: I: VII (p. 24)). Similarly, in her plea to Queen Isabeau to act as a mediator in France’s civil strife, Christine again takes for granted the moral superiority of those of noble blood when she argues that if pity, charity and clemency are virtues natural to women, “they must reasonably be the more abundant in a noble lady” (ERF: 76).

The crux of the traditional case by which the nobility’s high status was justified was their chivalric role in defending the community in time of war. By contrast, in bemoaning the miseries suffered by a France torn apart by civil war in the Lamentacion sur les maux de la France, Christine has been seen as offering a “radical redefinition” of the chivalric concepts of victory, glory and renown as they relate to the estate of the “chevaliers”, as questioning the contemporary “system of masculine values” and as concluding that “every form of war contradicts divine will”.

Yet while Christine certainly lamented the failure of the nobles to live up to their own chivalric ideals in the context of a civil war in which they treated their fellow countrymen as “mortal enemies”, she did not necessarily reject these ideals per se (LMF: 180-5; LWF: 304-8). Thus, in her Livre de l’advision Cristine and in her Livre des fais d’armes et de la chevalerie, a manual of the art of warfare written around the same time as the Lamentacion, Christine offers a traditional medieval defence of the just war and explicitly argues that while warfare often involves many great wrongs, nonetheless “wars undertaken for a just cause are permitted by God” who is the “Lord and Governor of Hosts and battles”. When crimes are committed in time of war, they are not, therefore, the product of war in itself but are rather the outcome of the “misuse” of war by men of evil will. Princes are not only allowed to wage war so as to maintain law and justice but rather, since war is sometimes an appropriate means for “the proper execution of justice”, are positively “obliged to do so” (BCAD: I: II (p. 14); I: IV (p. 16-17); III: III (p. 146); III: XIII (p. 163); LAC/VCP: II: 19). As Christine argues in her Livre de paix, whilst peace, particularly internal peace as opposed to the madness of civil war, may be the most delightful and joyful thing in the world, nevertheless the prince, like Charles V, must be prepared for battle and know how to “carry on his wars well” (BP: II: 1-2; I: 10; II: 17; III: 3; III: 13-14). If Christine believed in peace then it was peace through strength. Indeed, far from questioning “masculine” values, her Livre du corps de

---


policie cites, as a cautionary tale about the consequences of luxury, the example of the King of Persia who subjugated the people of Lydia by giving them a life of ease so that instead of being “powerful and brave in arms”, they became “as soft and dainty as women”. Rather than rejecting all forms of war, Christine argued that the pursuit of arms and chivalry, which is the estate duty of the nobles in their capacity as the “arms and hands of the body politic”, is a “most honourable office”, one for which they should honoured and rewarded and which would allow them to obtain a place in Paradise (BCAD I: I (p. 12); I: IX (p. 29-32); III: I (p. 144); BBP/LCP: I: 1; I: 28-29; II: 2-21; CB: LXIV; EPVH: III, IX).

Some scholars have seen Christine’s view of the body politic as being more comprehensive than that of John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome in its inclusion of the classes of merchants and labourers or have argued that Christine’s view that increasing the wealth of a country was one of the duties of the ruler was part of a “new ideal” of kingship, one which contrasts with that of earlier political theorists who saw the ruler’s functions as “promoting moral and political rectitude” and seeking the eternal salvation of himself and his subjects. Yet, in fact, while it is true that townspeople are not explicitly included in the description of the body politic in those passages which John of Salisbury claimed to have taken from Plutarch, elsewhere in the Policraticus he shows himself to be well aware of the existence of townspeople, artisans and traders, including textile-, wood- and metal-workers, from which “the corporate community of the republic derives benefit” (Pol: VI: 2 (p. 110-11); VI: 20 (p. 126)). Similarly, Giles of Rome had extolled the virtues of the division of labour between particular industries and between different towns, with trade and money facilitating such specialisation, as one of the means of meeting the needs of the community, and had taught that the ruler had a duty to ensure the provision of material necessities for his subjects (GKP: 59, 160-3, 169, 265-7, 323-4, 336-9, 383-4; LGR: 145-8, 245-7, 298-300, 314-9, 361-3). Indeed, one of the chief advantages of the metaphor of the body politic over the traditional medieval division of society into those who pray, those who fight and those who work was that it allowed for the existence of a wider variety of status-groups, professions and occupations than the traditional tripartite conception while still preaching a similar message about the need for both hierarchy and interdependence within society. Thus, far from Christine having challenged the “simplicity” or “naïveté” of medieval thought about the things of this world, her view of material prosperity and profit as being goals worthy of pursuit within a “complex and diverse social and economic order” fitted harmoniously within the mainstream of medieval thought, as represented by churchmen such as Aquinas and Giles of Rome, with its Aristotelian

---


If Christine’s views about the need for rulers to promote the material prosperity of their subjects did not distinguish her from earlier political theorists then how original was her account of the place of the clergy within the body politic? Did she, as some scholars have argued, develop the organic analogy in a “noticeably anti-clerical” way in abandoning John of Salisbury’s equation of the clergy in the Politeia with the “soul” of the body (Pol: V: 2 (p. 67)), in allowing the king to adopt a “corrective role” in relation to sinful clerics, in disregarding the Church’s claims for its supremacy over the temporal power, and in adopting a more secular outlook than John of Salisbury for whom the purpose of life and of society was “essentially religious”? It is certainly true that Christine did not follow John of Salisbury in drawing a parallel between the role of the clergy within society and that of the soul within the body. Indeed, she argued that, in maintaining the health of the kingdom, it is the role of the prince within society – not the Church – that resembles the function of the soul in sustaining the body (LFBM: II: 31-2). Yet, Christine’s employment of this metaphor here does not necessarily mean that she was adopting a more secular attitude than that found in her sources. After all, although John of Salisbury had portrayed the clergy as the “soul” of the body politic, even his use of the metaphor of the body politic has been seen as secular in its separation of the soul from the rest of the body and in his insistence that the prince (the head of the body politic) should be “preferred” before the body’s other members (Pol: V: 2 (p. 67); V: 6 (p. 69)). Moreover, in equating the prince with the soul, Christine actually seems to be following Giles of Rome who in turn had adopted the analogy from Aristotle. Thus, in the De regimine principum, Giles claimed that just as the soul is the salvation and life of the body which it rules and holds together, so a rightful king is the salvation and life of his realm, although he also likened the primacy of the prince within the polity to that of the heart – or alternatively of the head – within the body (GKP: 59, 212, 327, 388; LGR: 46, 190, 303, 365).  

By contrast, in his later De ecclesiastica potestate (1302), written in the context of the conflict between Philip IV of France and Pope Boniface VIII, Giles was to argue that “royal power should be subject to priestly power”, particularly to that of the pope, since rightful kingship was instituted through the priesthood, an

---

12 Aristotle, “Politics”, I: 5 (p. 16-17); I: 6 (p. 19); VII: 1 (p. 167); VII: 15 (p. 190). Giles also follows Aristotle in equating lords with the soul and servants with the body (GKP: 274). See also Seneca, “De clementia”, I, iii: 5.
office which predated and was superior to that of kings.\textsuperscript{13} When judged by the standards of the \textit{De ecclesiastica potestate} – if not those of the \textit{De regimine principum}, which fails to make any mention of the role of the clergy within the body politic – Christine was certainly far less hierocratic in her outlook than Giles. Thus, in the \textit{Livre du corps de policie}, she seems to equate the clergy (along with the merchants and burghers) with the belly of the body politic whilst in her \textit{Livre de paix} she presents the clerics as the flanks of the body (with the burghers cast as the loins and belly and the merchants as the body’s thighs) and thus as enjoying a less principal or honourable place than the nobles (the arms or shoulders), let alone than the prince (the head) himself. Indeed, rather than ascribing to the clergy the social primacy which they enjoyed in traditional versions of the tripartite theory, the \textit{Livre du corps de policie} explicitly included the clergy (although they are defined here as the students of the University of Paris and elsewhere) within the “third estate” of the realm, although they did enjoy pride of place within it (BBP/LCP: III: 4). Nonetheless, Christine did still regard the clergy as important members of the body politic with their position, which included the role of educating the young prince and of being devoted to “laws and learning”, being “high, noble and worthy of honour amongst the others” (BBP/LCP: I: 4; I: 6-7; I: 10; III: 1; III: 4; BP: II: 1; III: 6).

It is certainly true that Christine was sometimes critical of the clergy of her own day, saying that many of the bishops and priests were “truly devils” and that promotion in the church was often granted to those who were guilty of greed and luxury (BBP/LCP: I: 7; see, however, BP: III: 6). However, in criticising individual clerics, Christine was hardly being anti-clerical since such attacks on the morality of the clergy (as opposed to challenging their actual estate-function or privileges) were commonplace throughout the Middle Ages, usually being the work of reforming clerics themselves.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, in comparison with the critique of the clergy, from the pope downwards, which John of Salisbury mounted in the \textit{Policraticus}, where he denounces the clergy of his own day as being like the Pharisees whom Christ had attacked as wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7: 15), Christine’s own condemnation of immoral clerics is relatively mild (Pol: VI: 24 (p. 133-5); VII: 20-21 (p. 164-74)). Moreover, despite her criticisms of the clergy, it is problematic to claim that Christine wished the prince to adopt a “corrective” role in relation to the Church so that, in effect, the priesthood became like a “civil office”.\textsuperscript{15} In fact, Christine explicitly says that “correction [la correction] of people in the church is not his [i.e., the good prince’s] to undertake” (BP: I: 7 (p. 13-14); LCP: I: 7 (p. 11)).

Certainly, in principle, French clergymen of this period were “immune from lay jurisdiction” even in criminal cases and, at their coronations, French kings swore to uphold clerical liberties and immunities although, in practice, Charles V himself, despite his personal piety, was keen to maintain the royal prerogative against the


\textsuperscript{15} Nederman, “Body Politics”, p. 75.
Christine herself praised the “very true Christian” and “very devout and catholic” Charles V for “respecting the clergy’s rights and privileges” as part of his achievement in bringing order and happiness to the realm (LFBM I: 94; BP: I: 6; III: 22). Yet, while explicitly defending the rights of the Church, Christine, as so often, was also able to have it both ways. As she says, if the king did not enjoy the *de jure* right to “correct” the clergy then, in practice, he did have a *de facto* ability to take them to task since, when confronted with the authority of the ruler, no prelate or cleric is “so great that he will dare withstand or complain” about him if his prince “reproves him [le reprent] for his manifest sin or vice” (BBP/LCP: I: 7).

What is perhaps most striking in Christine’s discussion of the role of the clergy within the body politic is its abstraction and consequent failure to engage with the sharp controversies of the day about the role of the Gallican Church and of the papacy within the body politic. Thus, while it was easy to be in favour of defending the liberties of the Church in general, it was more difficult to specify what the liberties of the French Church actually were, either in relation to the Crown (for instance, its liability to royal taxation) or to the papacy (such as the extent of the pope’s right of provision to benefices in France and his ability to tax the French Church). Such questions had been a source of conflict since the thirteenth century but became particularly marked after the start of the Great Schism in 1378. Indeed, in 1398, the French Church had, in effect, declared its autonomy from the papacy when it renounced its obedience to the Avignon pope, Benedict XIII, a decision overturned in 1403 but then renewed in February 1407. Yet, although Christine seems to have been writing the *Livre du corps de polici*e in 1406-7, she makes no mention of these debates. Nevertheless, if Christine devoted little attention to the role of the Church within the body politic, this does not mean that she had adopted a new, secular outlook. On the contrary, just as John of Salisbury had attacked the glories and riches of this world as filth when they became impediments to salvation (Pol: V: 11 (p. 94); V: 17 (p. 101); VIII: 16 (p. 189-90); VIII: 17 (p. 196)) and Giles of Rome had stressed that earthly fame and wealth were insignificant when compared to the fate of one’s immortal soul (GKP: 24, 28-9; LGR: 20, 22-4) so Christine urged the prince to learn that “the grandeur of lordship” is only transitory, that worldly goods and honours are short-lived, and that one day he will have to account for his deeds, on peril of losing eternal salvation (BBP/LCP: I: 6-7).

Given Christine’s modern fame for her systematic defence of women against their clerkly detractors, it is not surprising to find that, while in many respects she herself was an Aristotelian in her metaphysics and her political theory, where she diverged most radically from the Philosopher and his medieval followers was on the

---


issue of women’s intelligence, rationality and ability to exercise political authority. Aristotle himself had taught that “the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature”. Thus, while both men and women can achieve a moral excellence, for instance by being courageous, “the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying”. In this perspective, women were regarded as unsuitable for the exercise of political power. As Giles of Rome argued, women’s lesser reason meant that they should be obedient to their husbands who were their “masters” and “lords” (GKP: 192-209, 275; LGR: 162-86, 253). Similarly, John of Salisbury took it for granted that men were the “noble sex” and women the “weaker” one and so warned against the “rulership of women and the effeminate” (Pol: V: 10 (p. 90); VI: 22 (p. 131). VII: 25 (p. 176)). Even Nicole Oresme, who taught that men’s superiority did not mean that women were inherently bad but simply that they were “less good”, still argued against the succession of women to the throne, citing the polity of the Amazons, with its female rulers, as a thing contrary to nature, “une chose hors nature”.

Christine, of course, adopted a very different position, arguing that women’s minds were just as sharp as men’s, that they were just as able to distinguish between right and wrong, and that they were perfectly capable of understanding the law and, indeed, of excelling in even more demanding disciplines. As a result, women were certainly able to “govern wisely” and to “establish good customs”. She cited many examples of women who mastered these arts such as the Empress Nicaula, ruler of Arabia, Egypt and Ethiopia, who governed her lands with “exemplary skill” and “established just laws by which to rule her people”, not to mention the many noblewomen who had ruled their territories or estates with prudence and justice. Similarly, while accepting that women were not, in general, as strong and courageous as men, Christine cited many examples of individual women whose “courage, strength and bravery” matched those of men, including the Amazons whose military prowess meant that they were feared by the Greeks more than any other race in the world (BCL/CD: I: 11; I: 13-26; I: 43). Certainly, given her own desire to offer counsel to the Dauphin in works such as the Livre de paix, Christine could hardly do otherwise than claim a right for women to speak out on political matters, a right which she explicitly asserts, via her use of the humility topos, at the opening to the Livre du corps de policie (BBP/LCP: I: 1). Indeed, the illustrations in the manuscripts to her Epistre Othea (originally written around 1400) seem to equate Othea, the goddess of wisdom who teaches virtue to the fifteen-year-old Hector, with Christine herself.

Traditionally, mirrors for princes had neglected the part played by women in political life (although this is also true of Christine’s own Livre du corps de policié) but a positive public role for women was available to Christine from the scriptures, chronicles and imaginative literature: that of the merciful intercessor. Following the

---

models of the Virgin Mary and the Old Testament Esther – both of whom Christine herself invoked (ERF: 76, 78) – real and fictional queens had traditionally been cast in this role, as when Froissart famously portrayed Queen Philippa throwing herself on her knees before Edward III on behalf of the six burghers of Calais in 1347.21 Even Giles of Rome, who was able to find very few positive things to say about the female sex, regarded women as capable of providing a model for male rulers in their tendency to be tender-hearted and merciful to others (GKP: 198-9; LGR: 173). Given Christine’s view of men as being “more hot-headed” and more vengeful than women, and so as being more ready to go to war, and her claim that women were “by nature more timid and also of a sweeter disposition” than men, it was natural for her to cast women in the role of peacemakers. Thus, while she did call upon men to act to bring peace to the realm, she nonetheless presented women’s gentle nature as “the best means of pacifying men”. Her Livre des trois vertus therefore urged the princess to mediate between the prince and his enemies and to reconcile him to those with whom he had come into conflict, whether this be foreign powers, his own barons, or his “rebellious people” (LMF: 182-5; BP: I: 2; II: 2; TCL: I: 8; II: 9; LTV: I: 9; II: 9).

Christine also saw women’s intelligence and virtue as being demonstrated in their role as deputies during the absence of their husbands or as widows who acted as regents or guardians when their children were minors. As she argued in her Livre des trois vertus, a widowed princess with young children is likely to have to mediate with the barons of the realm as well as to have to use her wisdom to defend her children’s inheritance against the effects of rebellion or foreign invasion (TCL: I: 21; LTV: I: 22). Her Livre de la cité des dames praises the role of women who ably carried out these duties such as Blanche of Castile who, following the death of her husband, Louis VIII, in 1226, was regent during the minority of her son, Louis IX, and who had ruled France with “such skill and care” until her son was of age “that no man could have done better” (BCL/CD: I: 13). As Adams has emphasised, Christine’s use of such exempla of female prudence were not simply part of a general defence of women. Rather, in the context of Charles VI’s recurrent episodes of madness and at a time when his wife, Isabeau of Bavaria, was playing a prominent role as a member, and even president, of the council which ruled in his place, her arguments also had an immediate and practical political significance.22 Christine’s Epistre a la royne de France (1405) therefore urges Isabeau to use the pity, charity and clemency which were natural to women so as to remedy the ills of the kingdom of France, which was being torn apart by the conflict between the dukes of Orleans and Burgundy (ERF: 70, 76, 78; see also LMF: 181; LWF: 305-6). In fact, as Adams points out, when Christine wrote her letter to Isabeau, the queen

21 For references, see Rigby, Wisdom and Chivalry, p. 141-5.
was already active as a peacemaker and almost immediately after Christine’s plea was instructed by the king to “continue to serve as mediator in the conflict”. Thus, if the role which Christine proposed for women as intercessors and mediators was far more active than the one which they were usually assigned in works of medieval political theory, it did not go beyond that which they already occupied in the reality of late medieval political life.

Similarly, while Christine praised women who acted as regents and took it for granted that a princess could be given “great powers to govern” as, for instance, the head of a council, she also stressed that this would only be the case during the minority of an heir or when the prince himself was occupied elsewhere. Likewise, while Christine assumed that noblewomen whose husbands were away at court or on campaign would need to know how to run an estate, how to defend her family’s landed interests at law and even how to launch attacks or to defend their property against military assaults from others, she once more presupposed that they would only perform such tasks in the absence of, and on behalf of, their husbands who had delegated “the responsibility and authority to govern” to them and that, in so doing, they would be guided by the counsel of “wise old men” (TCL: I: 11; II: 9-10; I: 12, II: 9-10). Thus, if Christine saw women as men’s equals in terms of their potential to act rationally or morally, she did not conclude from these egalitarian premises that, in actual practice, the political realm required the input of men and women on an “equal footing”. Even though women have the ethical capability and intellectual qualities needed to be brave warriors or wise rulers, their capabilities would be best put to use within their own sphere of life: “It’s not necessary for the public good for women to go around doing what men are supposed to do”. Rather God “has endowed each sex with qualities and attributes which they need to perform the tasks for which they are cut out” (BCL/CD: I: 11; I: 27; II: 7). For instance, “God gave men strong, powerful bodies to stride about and to speak boldly, which explains why it is men who learn law and maintain the rule of justice”, even though women have the innate intelligence to master the law (BCL/CD: I: 11; I: 13; BP: III: 5). Thus, while Christine’s *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* (1429) did praise a woman for overcoming France’s enemies in time of war and cited Joan’s victories as evidence for God’s approval of the female sex in general, Christine did not present her as a role model whose example should be followed by other women. Rather, she saw Joan as an instrument through whom God worked His “miracles”, her status as the heaven-sent saviour of the nation being demonstrated precisely by her exceptionality rather than


by her social or moral exemplarity (JDA: 97-104, 217-27, 265-6). As a result, although Christine rejected Aristotle’s specific claims about the intellectual inferiority of women, the Philosopher’s more general view of humans as “social animals” who survived by specialism and exchange remained the basis of her view of the traditional separation of men and women’s social roles (BP: II: 14). Thus, while the allegorical “City of Ladies” which Christine constructed as a defence of women in the *Livre de la cité des dames* lacks the class inequalities and the specialisation and division of labour which were the foundation of conventional medieval visions of the good society, the account of how social reality itself should be organised which she offered in the *Livre du corps de policie* and the *Livre des trois vertus* was based on precisely these principles.

**Social hierarchy and distributive justice**

As we have seen, both Christine’s political theory and her social philosophy were premised on the inevitability of inequality and on the desirability of obedience and deference on the part of the common people. Thus, despite presenting the “simples laboureux” who tilled the earth as the “most necessary” of all the members of the body politic, she did not conclude that this indispensability meant that those who fed the rest of society should be the most highly rewarded group within it (BBP/LCP: III: 10). Instead, Christine argued that it was the nobles and knights who were “wise in government and diligent in chivalrous pursuits” to whom the prince particularly owed “love, honour and great reward”. Indeed, given that they risked their lives for the public good, society would be hard-pressed to reward them sufficiently, however much praise or “expensive provisions” they were given (BBP/LCP: I: 29; BP: II: 3). As a result, she did not object that nobles received “among the highest and most exalted honours in this world” but simply demanded that those who enjoyed such honour should, by their deeds, live up to their noble name (BBP/LCP: II: 13). How, then, did Christine justify such unequal social and political arrangements?

In arguing for an unequal allocation of wealth, power and social honour to the different social estates, Christine implicitly relied upon the Aristotelian principle of “distributive justice”, one with which she was probably familiar from Henri de Gauchy’s translation of Giles of Rome’s *De regimine principum* (DRP: I, ii: x-xi; GKP: 54-60; LGR: 43-5) or via Nicole Oresme’s version of Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Aristotle had explicated various meanings of the word “justice”, one key sense being that which is “equal or fair” so that everyone receives his rightful due (a definition

---


of justice that came to be particularly associated in the Middle Ages with Cicero), whereas injustice is when someone receives too much or too little of that to which he is entitled.\(^{29}\) However, this definition of justice simply posed the question of how one is to establish what is equal or fair and of how what one is rightly due is to be determined. In answering this question, Aristotle had distinguished between various types of justice. One, which Aristotle defined as a specific form of “corrective” justice and which Aquinas called “commutative justice”, is that involved in voluntary exchanges between individuals (or, as Aquinas put it, between the separate parts of a whole) such as buying and selling. Here, £10 worth of corn should be exchanged for £10 of cloth, there being an equitable *quid pro quo* or “arithmetic” proportionality of things given to things received, and the law treats the two parties to the exchange as equals. A second form of justice is that which Aristotle called “distributive” justice and which Aquinas defined as dealing with the relationship between the whole and its parts since it is concerned with the “distribution of a community’s goods to its members”. Here there is not the simple equality of commutative exchange. Rather, as Aristotle said, while this form of justice requires equality for those who are equals it also involves inequality for those who are defined by society as being unequal. In such cases there is a “geometric” proportionality between the particular groups of people and the share of society’s common goods (such as honour, power and wealth) which is allocated to them. As Aristotle put it, “if persons are not equal, they will not have equal shares”. For Aquinas, the principle of distributive justice thus required the allocation of a community’s goods to its members in proportion to their hierarchical “worth” or “status”:\(^{30}\)

Giles of Rome invoked this idea in order to explicate how both the members of the human body and the different parts of the body politic should be related. He argued that while the individual members of the human body, such as the eye or the foot, should exist in a relationship of commutative justice in which each needs the services of the others, the continued survival of the body also required that its parts should be related in terms of distributive justice. Thus, the heart, as the prime source of life, should rule over the rest of the body and impart life and movement to all its members according to their hierarchical “dignity”, such hierarchy being characteristic of all natural things. Likewise, rightful order within the body politic requires the existence of the distributive justice by which rewards are granted to the

---


members of the community according to their dignity or worth. Giles argued that if justice is the virtue which assigns everyone his due then social justice required the “proportionate equality”, i.e., the inequality, in which men receive their deserts, in terms of wealth, honour and power, according to their unequal dignitas (GKP: 54-60, 187, 193, 254-5, 301: LGR: 43-5, 162, 232, 275). It was precisely because each man was entitled to receive his due that, as thinkers such as Aquinas and Giles argued, subjects should render their rulers the reverence and obedience which were their right: justice here meant obedience.31

From Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic thought, medieval philosophers inherited the idea that nature provided a guide as to how human social, political and ethical life should be conducted.32 Within the Aristotelian tradition, nature itself was seen as working according to the concept of the rightful “mean”, so that nothing within it is marred by any excess or deficiency. Accordingly, since human ethics should follow nature, it followed that, as Aristotle himself had famously said, human virtue itself constituted a mean between two vices. Christine herself gave a stock instance of this when she followed Aristotle and Giles of Rome in defining liberality as the virtue which constitutes the mean between, on the one hand, the insufficiency of liberality that is avarice and, on the other, the excess of it which constitutes foolish prodigality (GKP: 42, 63, 68, 74, 193; LGR: 50, 55, 60, 166-7; BP: III: 5, 23-4).33 More generally, this outlook could also be used in order to defend a social distribution of wealth, power and status that was unequal but which could still be presented as measured, proportionate and moderate. Indeed, even before the translation of Aristotle’s Ethics into Latin, John of Salisbury, who, as Nederman has emphasised, was familiar with Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean through the Organon, had argued in favour of social “equity” and against a “disproportionate” allocation of resources to any particular member of the body politic whilst simultaneously emphasising the need for hierarchy, inequality and deference within it.34 The reciprocity which should exist between the head and the body’s other members did not imply any strict or simple equality but rather meant that while superiors should “devote themselves” to those below them, inferiors should “respond likewise to the rights of their superiors” (Pol: V: 2 (p. 66); V: 7 (p. 76); VI: 20 (p. 126)). Similarly, while Giles of Rome sought to justify the existence of private property and the need for inequality in the distribution of wealth, he did not seek to defend the limitless or disproportionate pursuit of individual riches. Instead he argued that each man should be rewarded with the wealth needed to maintain his rank or estate (GKP: 70, 76, 100, 252-4, 264-5, 271-3, 301-6, 311-5, 330; LGR: 55, 61, 89, 232-3, 243-5, 249-51, 275-9, 285-90, 307; DRP: II, iii: xii).

---

31 For references, see Rigby, Wisdom and Chivalry, p. 195-7.
34 Nederman, Medieval Aristotelianism and its Limits, I: 60, 63-7, 70-4.
Thus, while the idea that there is a “natural equilibrium within the body” and that no part of the body is entitled to a disproportionate allocation of society’s common resources has been seen as a late medieval innovation which “stretched” or “subverted” conventional social and political doctrines, this idea was actually quite compatible with — indeed, was explicitly linked to — the traditional, hierarchical and “head-orientated conception” of the body politic of writers such as John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome. After all, given the customary definition of justice as each man receiving his “due”, the belief that no-one could claim a disproportionate share of the common goods of the community was a virtual tautology. Similarly, the idea that no part of the body politic was “greater than the whole” was not a new idea in the later middle ages but had actually been one of the central features of the organic analogy from the very beginning. However, the fact that no part of the body could claim to be greater than the whole did not mean that no part of the body enjoyed a primacy within the whole: being against excessive inequality did not entail being in favour of egalitarianism. Since the purpose of ideology is usually to “have it both ways”, rather than being used to buttress a single point about the need for social and political inequality, the metaphor of the body was commonly invoked in order to illustrate a nuanced argument about how diversity within the body politic was compatible with unity and how reciprocity could be reconciled with hierarchy and subordination.

Although, like John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, Christine’s *Livre du corps de policie* does not explicitly use the term “distributive justice”, it is precisely this principle which implicitly underlies the hierarchical social and political order which she, like John, saw as being necessary and rightful within the body politic. Thus, having set out the definition of justice as “a measure which renders to each man his due” (i.e., “son droit” or “ce qui lui appartient”), one which was familiar to late medieval thinkers not only from Aristotle and Cicero but also from Roman civil law and Christian theology, Christine follows John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome in arguing that this “due” is not necessarily an equal one when she argues that the prince himself receives “ce qui lui est deu” when he is obeyed and feared by his subjects. If, as Christine later claimed in her *Livre de paix*, “the role of Reason is to distribute all things equally”, so that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished, then, as the *Livre du corps de policie* makes clear, such “equity” itself demands that people’s rewards, in terms of their allocation of honour, authority and wealth from the common goods of the community, should themselves be unequal (BBP/LCP: I: 19; I: 21; I: 29; BP: I: 5; LFBM I: 63). More broadly, if no-one should be guilty of “extortion” or of “overcharging” for the services which they render to their fellows, each man is nonetheless entitled to receive that which is necessary to “live properly” in his own particular place within the social hierarchy. The prince should therefore exercise measure and moderation and receive only that which it is “reasonable to collect” from his subjects when he has a good cause, such as defending his country against external enemies, but should do so “without gnawing to the bone his poor commoners”. Developing here, as elsewhere, the metaphor of the ruler as a “good shepherd” to his subjects, Christine repeated the

---

36 Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, p. 113, 121, 145.
words which Valerius Maximus attributed to the Emperor Tiberias: “the good shepherd shears his sheep only once a year; he does not fleece them all the time, nor skin them so that he draws blood” (BBP/LCP: I: 9-11; see also BP: III: 15). In the Livre de paix, Christine explicitly links this concept of social justice with the metaphor of the body politic, repeating a claim previously made by Gerson in Vivat Rex in arguing that when the prince, or anyone else, seeks to enrich himself at the expense of other people this is like one part of the body seeking “to draw to itself the blood, health and substance of its neighbouring limb”, thus causing the weakness and deterioration of the whole body (BP: III: 25). It is this notion of justice as each person receiving his or her rightful if unequal due which explains why, in the Livre de la cité des dames, Christine depicts the personified Justice carrying a measuring vessel (BCL/CD: I: 6) since, as she puts it in the Epistre Othea, in a maxim she ascribed to Aristotle on the basis of her source, Les fleurs de toutes vertus: “Justice is a measure that God has established on earth to limit all things” (EO: 208). As she says in her Livre de paix, “the wise man, who knows what goodness is, wants to have enough and no more, in order to do good” (BP: III: 25).

That, for Christine, a just and equitable distribution of society’s goods would be achieved by taking into account each person’s particular – and unequal – social estate can be seen in her approving description of the “triumphs” granted to the generals of ancient Rome in which the victor was greeted by the citizens “dressed in rich robes, according to their rank” and in her advice to the prince to show his magnanimity by welcoming each man “according to his degree” (BBP/LCP: I: 29; BP: II: 13). Similarly, when a prince (or other powerful person) gives a gift to someone as a “reward for something well done”, the value of the gift should be in line with the merit which has occasioned it whereas when gifts are made from pure generosity on the part of the prince he can give “small ones to poor and indigent persons”, so that each person is rewarded “according to his rank”. Even the way that people speak should be related to their own social class (a “grand style is not fitting for everyone”) and to the status of the people whom they are addressing, with each person being addressed “according to their rank and station” (BBP/LCP: I: 14; BP: III: 29; III: 33). Christine’s Livre des trois vertus thus explicitly recognises that although all temporal wealth and social rank come to us from God, He “has not divided the wealth equally” or given equal honour to each social position. However, this does not at all mean that God’s distribution of wealth is “unjust”. Rather, by giving more to some than to others He has offered them the chance to show their virtue by providing charity to the poor while simultaneously giving the poor man the chance to be “crowned with the diadem of patience” in return for his “long suffering”. Accordingly, “there is nothing wrong with the princess or great lady amassing treasure of money from revenue or a pension provided that she receives it lawfully and without committing extortion”. While such a lady has a duty to be charitable, the Word of God does not require her to give “everything to the poor if

---

37 For the ruler as good shepherd, see also LFBM I: 126, 242; BP: III: 15; MF: 4105-6; BDAC: I: III (p. 15); CLE: 5521; Gerson, “Pour la réforme du royaume”, p. 1138, 1160.
38 Gerson, “Pour la réforme du royaume”, p. 1146, 1156.
she does not wish to. She can legitimately keep it for the necessities of her rank and to pay servants” and for her expenses in giving gifts, buying provisions and repaying debts. If it is wrong for a princess or great lady to have “unnecessary or extravagant” clothing she can nonetheless be “richly adorned” in her dress, ornaments and jewels in accordance with “her station in life” and her revenues and can enjoy “a great court with courtiers and much ceremony” in line with the “position where God has placed her”, provided that she does not adopt “more magnificence than is reasonable”. Good “public order” requires that each person should be “satisfied with his social standing” so that duchesses do “not wear the gowns of queens, nor countesses those of duchesses, nor ordinary ladies those of countesses”. Likewise, explicitly invoking the “golden mean” as the “most civilized and the most pleasing course” of action, Christine followed Giles of Rome in arguing that since “each woman should wear such clothing as indicates her husband’s and her rank”, a towns-woman should not “desire to dress above her station” and seek to dress like a noblewomen. The rank of merchants is “fine and good” in itself and so the women of this class should “wear their rightful clothing, each woman according to her position” (TCL: I: 7; I: 9; I: 10; I: 11; I: 18; II: 9; II: 11; III: 2; III: 3; LTV: I: 8; I: 10; I: 12; I: 19; II: 9; II: 11; III: 2; III: 3 DRP: II: i: xxi; GKP: 203-5; LGR: 179-81). Given this outlook, Christine not only regarded dressing above one’s place in society as being wicked in itself but, more generally, saw it as symbolizing the broader disruption and breakdown of status distinctions, and the rejection by individuals of the place which they had been assigned within the divinely-ordained social hierarchy, which she presented as central to the moral and social disorder of her own day.

Christine’s expectation that rank would be demonstrated by appearance and her equation of such social hierarchy with rightful order and justice is also evident in her description of Charles V’s magnificence in the Livre des fais et bonnes meurs and in the Livre de paix. Here, when the king rode out with his nobles, he is described as being set apart from the rest of his company by his royal array so that, despite the rich dress of his nobles and gentlemen and the “measure” of the king’s own clothing, everyone would still recognise which of them enjoyed a royal pre-eminence. Similarly, when the king greeted the Emperor Charles IV on his visit to Paris in 1378, he made sure that, despite the honours which were lavished on his royal guest, the emperor did not ride on a white horse, as he was accustomed to do when he entered towns under his own power, in case this should be taken as a “signe de dominacion” within the kingdom of France (LFBM: I: 50-1; II: 97; see also BP: I: 8; III: 30). Thus, while praising Charles V’s humility, Christine also noted the splendour of his court, with its ceremonial and feasts, of his building works, and of his clothing and jewels, which included “the richest crown France had ever seen, which cost an extraordinary amount from the treasury”. But whereas in a tyrant such spending would have been based on the extortion and impoverishment of his subjects, Charles’s Solomonic glory, one unparalleled in a French king since the time of Charlemagne, was an expression of the king’s wisdom and led to the prosperity of the artisan and merchants from whom such works and luxury goods were commissioned (BP: I: 7; III: 27-8, 30).

* On the imperial visit, see F. Autrand, Charles V le Sage, Paris, Fayard, 1994, p. 779-805.
If it is the function of ideology to eternalise the social order in the realm of thought and to stress the essential harmony of the different groups which make up any particular society then, from John of Salisbury through to Christine de Pizan and beyond, the metaphor of the body and the conception of the “distributive justice” which supposedly existed between its unequal parts were ideal for conveying a view of the contemporary social and political order as being inevitable, natural and divinely ordained and as being constituted in the universal interests of all its members. In general, ideology works by investing positive but indeterminate abstractions, such as “justice” or “equality”, with an historically-specific and socially-loaded content. As a result, rather than deciding whether Christine’s political vision was “egalitarian” or not, it may be more useful, as we have attempted to do here, to examine the particular sense which she herself ascribed to the notion of “equality”. It would seem that Christine, like other political theorists in the Aristotelian tradition, did indeed believe that everyone had an equal right to receive his or her “due” – it was simply that this due, in terms of wealth, power and status, was itself a profoundly unequal one.

Conclusion

As we have seen, recent interpretations of Christine de Pizan’s political theory, and in particular of her use of the metaphor of the body politic, have often stressed its intellectual originality and its social inclusivity. Yet, when we examine the fundamental principles on which her work is based, Christine’s social and political outlook, with its stress on the need to reconcile co-operation and interdependence within the community with the existence of hierarchy and inequality, seems strikingly similar to that found in the writings of earlier thinkers, such as John of Salisbury and Giles of Rome, whom she took as her sources. In general, her political philosophy was in line with the orthodoxy of medieval Aristotelianism and, indeed, at times, embodied a particularly hierarchical understanding of that tradition. Thus, the fact that some scholars may have denied any novelty to Christine’s work on the basis of political motives of which we may not approve does not mean that we should go to the opposite extreme and lay claim to an originality for her work where it does not actually exist. After all, Christine’s aim in writing a work such as the Livre du corps de police during the years 1404-7 – when France was on the brink of civil war – was neither to demonstrate her intellectual ingenuity nor to claim a place for herself in the canon of political philosophy but rather to make a practical intervention in a time of profound political crisis.

However, a recognition of how much Christine’s political outlook owed to the work of earlier theorists, does not entail a denial of all originality to her political writings. Firstly, the obvious exception to Christine’s agreement with previous authorities was her defence of female virtue, rationality and prudence and of women’s ability to participate in political life. Even though she did not conclude that women’s

---

41 For references on ideology, see S. H. Rigby, English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1995, p. 303-10.
intelligence required them to play an equal part in public life with men, she did express in theoretical terms a defence of the political role which medieval women already enjoyed in practice, a role which her contemporary, male theorists systematically neglected. Secondly, where the content of Christine’s political philosophy was often most innovative was not in its basic principles but rather in its application of these principles to particular situations, this ability to put wisdom into practice being Aristotle’s – and Christine’s – own definition of prudence (LFBM II: 21).  

For instance, while, as we have seen, it was a commonplace of medieval political theory that kings should be learned, Christine was able to demonstrate the intellectual and practical wisdom of Charles V in her biography of the king in a very specific way when she praised his commissioning of translations of the Bible along with works by Augustine, Aristotle, John of Salisbury and many others (LFBM II: 42-4). In this sense, Christine’s originality in her Livre des faits et bonnes meurs lay not in its underlying principles but rather in its conversion of the detail of Charles V’s actions into exempla to be used as a model for his successors and in expressing his political practice in a systematic form and within a general theoretical framework. As a result, Christine did not so much “transform” her sources, such as the Policraticus or Giles’s De regimine principum, as creatively apply their ideas to particular situations.  

Finally, the originality of Christine’s output is often to be found not so much in her basic political ideas but rather in its use of fresh imagery so as to de-familiarise what were in fact commonplace ideas in order to present them to her readers afresh. As Kennedy has argued, Christine’s works of political philosophy are both didactic treatises and works of artistic creation. Seen in this perspective, much of their inventiveness lay not in their political content but rather in the artistry of the form in which this content was expressed. Thus, even though the Livre du corps de policie invokes the conventional analogy of the state with the human body, it then proceeds to do something new with this extremely familiar raw material by turning the idea of the “body politic” into the unifying image of the entire book – being the first work of medieval political theory to do so – and by linking it to a whole series of related metaphors of health and sickness, growth and decay, and balance and imbalance.  

As Delany pointed out, modern scholars have often been unwilling to admit that their own favoured authors from the past – with Christine de Pizan being a prime example – may have held opinions which seem unpalatable to modern audiences.  

---

46 S. Delany, “History, Politics and Christine Studies: A Polemical Reply”, Politics, Gender and Genre, ed. Brabant, p. 193-206, at p. 196, 198. It should be stressed that recognizing that the views expressed by medieval authors were often alien to our own does not mean that it is our task, as academics, to denounce such thinkers for having failed to anticipate our own moral or political outlook.
The Body Politic in the Social and Political Thought of Christine

Here, by contrast, it has been argued that, disappointing though it may be to us as modern readers, the political theory of Christine de Pizan should not be understood as subverting the traditional connotations of the idea of the body politic. Rather, her political theory was profoundly hierarchical rather than egalitarian, with the Aristotelian notion of “distributive justice” allowing her to reconcile a conception of the members of the body as being involved in a reciprocal and “equitable” relationship with one which emphasised the inevitability, necessity and benefits to all of social and political inequality. There were, as we saw in Part I of this article, medieval political theorists such as Ptolemy of Lucca and Marsilius of Padua whose work, in developing an “ascending” notion of political authority in which the ruler was responsible to, constrained by, and even chosen by the political community, does provide a contrast with the focus on the need for hierarchical subordination of the members of the body politic to its monarchical head which was found in the political philosophy of a John of Salisbury or a Giles of Rome. However, Christine de Pizan, with her emphasis on the desirability of royal government, on the dangers of rule by the many, and on the need for hierarchy and inequality within the social and political order, should not be included amongst their number.

Stephen H. Rigby
University of Manchester