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Christine de Pizan

The Book of the Body Politic

Edited by
Kate
Langdon Forhan

Christine de Pizan was born in Venice and raised in Paris at the court of Charles V of France. Widowed at the age of twenty-five, she turned to writing as a source of comfort and income, and went on to produce a remarkable series of books, on subjects including poetry, politics, chivalry, warfare, religion and philosophy. She is considered to be France's first female professional writer.

This is the first translation into modern English of Christine de Pizan's major political work, *The Book of the Body Politic*. Written during the Hundred Years War, it discusses the education and behavior appropriate for princes, nobility and common people, so that all classes can understand their responsibilities towards society as a whole. A product of a time of civil unrest, *The Book of the Body Politic* offers a medieval political theory of interdependence and social responsibility from the perspective of an educated woman.

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HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



CHRISTINE DE PIZAN
The Book of the Body Politic

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CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

*The Book of the
Body Politic*

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
KATE LANGDON FORHAN

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To
My Students at Siena College
and
Jean Blancard Forhan

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Introduction

Considered to be the first woman of letters of France, Christine de Pizan (c.1364–c.1430) was born in Venice. She was the daughter of Thomas de Pizan, medical doctor and astrologer, whose training at the prestigious University of Bologna brought him an appointment to the court of Charles V of France. In 1369 he settled his young family in Paris which became their permanent home. Christine was encouraged in her education both by her father and her young husband, Etienne du Castel, whom she married in 1380. Christine's love of learning and familiarity with court life brought their reward when she was suddenly left a young widow at the age of twenty-five, with three young children, a widowed mother, and an orphaned niece to support. Christine turned to a life of letters at first for consolation and later for income, writing a series of remarkable books that included works of poetry, biography, politics, chivalry, warfare, religion and philosophy for a variety of wealthy and noble patrons.

When *The Book of the Body Politic* was written between late 1404 and 1407, France was hovering on the brink of civil war. The intricate and complicated struggle between the French and the English commonly called the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) was an extension of the conflict between these two developing nations that had begun in the twelfth century. Complicated by family rivalries and changing ideas about property, inheritance, sovereignty, and the feudal relationship, France had “won” the first round, ending with the Treaty of Paris in 1259, although England had retained its possession of Aquitaine, held as a fief from the French kings. As the French economy

strengthened, English economic and political interests in Aquitaine were threatened. In 1337, Edward III of England announced that he was claiming the French throne, on the grounds of superior hereditary right. Since he was a grandson of Philip IV through his mother, and the present king, Philip VI, was only a nephew, Edward claimed to be in the direct line of succession.

Philip responded by confiscating Aquitaine as punishment for this rebellion against an overlord. This second phase of the war was a disaster for France. The French nobility was decimated at the battles of Crecy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), and ultimately humiliated when King John of France (1350–1364) was captured and carried off to England. The ensuing crisis and confusion included a peasant revolt against high taxes and the losses of war, marauding bands of soldiers terrorizing the people, greedy nobles trying to extend their privileges, as well as attempts by the Estates General to control abuses and reform taxes – all of which threatened the authority of the regent, John's son Charles. John finally negotiated his release in 1360 in exchange for Aquitaine and three million gold ecus, but complications returned him to English hands and he died in 1364 with the final steps of the treaty not taken.

The intelligent and responsible rule of Charles V (r.1364–1380) allowed a brief recovery, but was followed by confusion and struggle for power when he died in September 1380, leaving his heir, Charles VI (r.1380–1422) not quite twelve years old. The king had named his own brother, Louis, duke of Anjou, (d.1384) to be regent for the young king with two of the boy's other relatives, the dukes of Burgundy and Bourbon, to be his guardians. Duke John of Berry, with no official role as regent or guardian, nonetheless controlled about a third of France through his own estates. Although the young prince managed to escape the legal control of his uncles once he became an adult, he could not elude their machinations and ambitions, and was very much under the influence of his younger and more able brother, Louis of Orleans. The chaos was compounded when, in 1392, the twenty-four-year-old king suffered his first attack of insanity, which afflicted him periodically for the rest of his life. The growing disability of Charles VI trapped France between the two powerful personalities of the king's younger brother, Louis, duke of Orleans and his uncle, Philip "the Bold," duke of Burgundy, and after Philip's death in 1404, that of his son, John, "the Fearless." The gap between

the royal houses widened until on November 23, 1407, Louis of Orleans was murdered by an assassin, Raoul d'Anquetonville, who had been hired by John the Fearless. The duke fled for his safety, but in an attempt to obtain pardon from the king, a defence of his actions was written and proclaimed at court by Master Jean Petit of the University of Paris, justifying the assassination of Louis on the grounds of tyrannicide. Jean Petit's argument, that tyrannicide is not only justified but meritorious, was taken from John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*. The widowed duchess of Orleans found support and protection for her young son, Charles of Orleans, in Bernard, count of Armagnac, who was now the leader of the opposition to Duke John of Burgundy.

Things were not much better in England. The murder of Richard II in 1400, the adventurous spirit of Henry IV and his need for additional revenue, clashed with French attempts at aggrandizement and protection of commercial interests. The papal schism from 1378 to 1417 left Europe without an acceptable mediator, and in fact each of the papal rivals encouraged the nation supporting him – Urban VI the English and Clement VII the French.

In France, the quarrels, ambitions, greed, and self-interest exhibited by the members of the royal family over the next thirty years brought the nation to civil war and impoverished it with heavy taxation. The political bankruptcy of the nobility was further demonstrated when the Burgundians and the Armagnacs each made overtures to the English, hoping to have their help to destroy the other. The English king, Henry V (r.1413–1422) had his own agenda – to seize the throne of France – and invaded in 1415, crushing the French army at Agincourt. Rather than rallying to defend the kingdom, the Burgundians continued to fight the Armagnacs, openly allying themselves with the English in 1420. The alliance allowed the English to impose the Treaty of Troyes on Charles VI, which made Henry V Regent of France whenever the king was incapacitated by his mental illness, as well as making Henry heir to the throne. This effectively disinherited the Dauphin, Charles of Guyenne, third and only living son of Charles VI. But both Henry V and Charles VI died in 1422, leaving Henry's infant son, Henry VI, nominally king of France and England.

In the meantime, the son of Charles VI had been a virtual prisoner of the Armagnacs in the south of France, without a hope of rule. But