
H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 145

Tracy Adams, *Christine de Pizan and the Fight for France*. University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. xi + 220 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-271-05071-3.

Reviewed by Geri L. Smith, U.S. Military Academy, West Point

For some forty years now, scholars have been examining the works of fifteenth-century author Christine de Pizan from all angles. In this book, Tracy Adams ventures into an area that has received comparatively little attention, which is Christine's active engagement, in the form of her literary works, in the Burgundian-Armagnac conflict that defined her day. While scholars have often viewed Christine as ambivalent, even shifting, in her loyalties, Adams sets out to show that Christine was much more strongly and consistently Orleanist throughout her career than has previously been appreciated.

In the prologue, Adams asserts that scholars have typically analyzed Christine's politics through the filter of a particular view of history, itself largely shaped by the nationalist inclination of nineteenth-century historians reading pro-Burgundian chronicles and propaganda. Unwilling to accept the biases imposed on Christine's texts, Adams "seeks to rehistoricize by reexamining material long controlled by a particular narrative" (p. 10). By considering more varied and recent approaches to the study of this era, Adams widens the perspective on Christine's cultural context to arrive at a more nuanced appreciation of her politics. Further, Adams emphasizes Christine's writing as a conscious attempt to encourage peace and unity and to champion a certain model of kingship (incarnated by Charles V) as well as female royal authority (centered on Isabeau of Bavaria).

Adams opens chapter one with a gripping account of a vicious Burgundian attack against the Armagnacs in Paris in 1418, immediately engaging the reader in the drama of this historical moment. The scene is just one example of the prevailing violence which Adams views as key to reading Christine's corpus (p. 12). Adams goes on to lay out the concepts of kingship and regency that were current in Christine's day, arguing that having been reared in the royal milieu, Christine's vision of kingship would have aligned itself with the qualities of Charles V and the leadership structure that he cultivated. Further, Christine would have viewed Louis of Orléans as the sole legitimate regent during Charles VI's bouts of madness (p. 5) and would have considered the ambitions of Philip of Burgundy a threat to the proper governing of France. With those concepts in place, Adams considers autobiographical references in a number of Christine's works—including the *Mutacion de fortune*, the *Advison Cristine*, and the *Fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*—to glean Christine's take on the political situation of her time. Overall, in these references, positive sentiment prevails on the side of Louis of Orléans, while even early on there are hints of reproach toward Philip of Burgundy.

In each of the following chapters, Adams first carefully lays out the details of successive phases of the conflict from 1393 through 1418, detangling an infinitely complex web of alliances, betrayals, and political maneuverings, all against the backdrop of Charles VI's debilitating mental illness. She also considers other such culturally significant factors as the role of the University of Paris, the problem of

the Great Schism, the conflict with England, and the empty seat of the Holy Roman Emperor, all of which permeated the feud as well. The second part of each chapter is an analysis of Christine's works composed in the period in question. Thanks to an efficient writing style, Adams packs an impressive amount of information into a relatively small amount of space. Adams is also a good storyteller and manages to keep her text engaging throughout. Her careful analysis weaves history and literature into a unified whole.

In chapter two, Adams treats the years 1393 to 1401. This period marks the beginnings of both the intense rivalry between the dukes and of Christine's career as a poet. Adams begins by reexamining the onset of the feud to "correct for the Burgundian bias" (p. 30) that has historically shrouded Louis with a bad reputation, casting him as prone to imposing abusive taxes and squandering the royal treasury. Adams's new look adds nuance to how Louis may have been perceived, asserting that his positive qualities were not as unappreciated, and support among Parisians not as tenuous, as previous readings may suggest. As for Christine, much of her writing at this time was in the form of love poetry, which Adams analyzes as a window into Christine's views on the feud. The texts featured in this chapter are the *Cent balades*, followed by the *Livre du debat de deux amans*, the *Epistre au dieu d'amours*, the *Dit de la rose*, the *Livre des trois jugemens*, and the *Livre du dit de Poissy*. Adams concludes that Christine's love poetry was an encoded commentary on the unstable situation of the leadership of France and that Christine was attempting to "create a poetic community united by warm feeling toward the Duke of Orleans" (p. 61).

Chapter three moves on to 1401 through 1404, aligning Christine's early political allegories with the "point of no return" (p. 63) in the feud. With Philip and Louis opposing each other on every issue, this is also a period in which Isabeau's status as mediator became more solidified. In this context, Adams examines the *Epistre d'Othea*, the debate surrounding the *Romance of the Rose*, the *Chemin de longue etude*, and the *Mutacion de fortune*. She observes the emergence of a more "overtly erudite and intellectual" (p. 73) narrator figure than in Christine's earlier works and a more focused attempt to rally support for Louis in her writings. Adams argues that whereas scholars have typically viewed Christine's shift from love poetry to politically-infused allegory, and from lighter to weightier issues, as part of her evolution as a writer and social observer, that shift is exaggerated (p. 93), as Christine's love poetry already featured France's political difficulties as an undercurrent. Where Adams does see an important shift, however, is in the nature of the narrator figure that takes shape through these works. Adams establishes a parallel, for example, between the gender-changing narrator of the *Mutacion de fortune*, who becomes a man in order to take charge of her ship floundering at sea after the loss of its captain, and the situation of Queen Isabeau, who must take control of France, left floundering in the absence of a steady king.

Chapter four focuses on the year 1405. Upon the death of Philip of Burgundy in 1404, his son Jean would succeed him, ushering in the next phase of the conflict. An important theme of this chapter is Christine's support of Isabeau's regency, as well as the queen's role as both peacemaker in the face of Jean's attempts to assert control and protector of her son's place as future leader. Here, Adams considers Christine's first significant forays into prose: the *Fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, the *Cité des dames*, the *Epistre a la reine*, and the *Livre des trois vertus*. She attributes the "relatively discreet" (p. 118) narrator of the *Fais et bonnes meurs* to the work's having been commissioned by the Burgundian side, while the prominent narrator, an embodiment of Christine, in the three other pro-women works communicates support for Isabeau. The chapter ends with a look at the *Livre du duc des vrais amans*, which Adams reads as more than a criticism of the courtly love system, but rather as political allegory--the gossip that destroys the love relationship in the text represents the damage caused by Burgundian propaganda against Isabeau and Louis.

Chapter five examines the period 1405 to 1407, up to the assassination of Louis at the behest of Jean. Starting with a look at Jean Gerson's conciliatory sermon "Vivat Rex" and the Burgundian propaganda piece, *Songe veritable*, Adams gives an idea of the kind of discourse that dominated at this time, when

many were desperately seeking to establish peace while tensions continued to mount. These are also the years in which Christine composed a number of her most imposing prose works: the *Livre de la prodromie* that favors Louis; the *Advison Cristine* that makes a sad statement about the state of France, with a message of blame for the Burgundians; and the *Livre du corps de policie* that highlights the importance of a cohesive and functional society with a strong leader in charge. This chapter is particularly effective in substantiating Adams's assertions about Christine's politics, showing these three texts to be a warning to all about Jean as a threat to the stability of France.

Chapter six begins with the November 1407 assassination of Louis of Orléans and follows Jean of Burgundy's subsequent rise in power until he too was assassinated in 1418. Adams considers four of Christine's works from this tumultuous period. First is the *Lamentacions sur les maux de la guerre civile*, an unsuccessful plea for the queen and the Armagnacs to unite against the Burgundian threat. Then comes the *Livre des fais d'armes et de chevalerie*, a treatise on warfare, viewed as "quietly" supporting the Armagnacs (p. 160), as Christine faced the fact that peace was unlikely. Next is the *Livre de la paix*, through which Christine supports and promotes the dauphin Louise of Guyenne by aligning him with the kingly virtues of Charles V. Finally, in the mournful *Epistre de la prison de vie humaine*, Christine laments the Battle of Agincourt, so catastrophic for the Armagnacs. The conclusion of this chapter brings the book full circle, referring back to the violent year 1418, with which this study had so energetically opened. Adams sums up by noting that as of 1410, "Christine's writing becomes less encouraging of peace and more openly partisan" (p. 172), with the four works discussed in this chapter as evidence of Christine's late-career tendencies.

In the epilogue, Adams reaffirms that recognizing Christine's Orleanist leanings is "essential for understanding Christine as a political writer" (p. 174). She also reaffirms her goal to highlight Christine's support for Isabeau, even asserting that Christine's interest in this female leader gave rise to her effort to champion women more generally in her writings.

This book has many strengths. Adams's mastery of Christine's imposing corpus, as well as the nuances of this extraordinary time in history, is very impressive. She is consistent and methodical in presenting her argument. It is perhaps not surprising that the discussions of the texts with the most direct political overtones are the most immediately convincing in demonstrating Christine's attempts to intervene in politics. In the discussions of love poetry and less explicitly political narrative writings, there were times when this reader wished for a clearer articulation of the extent to which Adams believes Christine was conscious of sending (sometimes seemingly subliminal) messages to her readers and addressees. For example, the assertions that the internal structure of the *Cent balades* cycle "invites reflection on the loss of leadership as manifested at the individual, communal, and universal levels" (p. 46), and that the figure of Cupid in the *Dit de la rose* is to be read as a proxy for Charles VI as an unreliable guardian of his people (p. 52), point to what Adams calls the "political unconscious" in Christine's works (p. 5). These are patterns discernible to a keen literary critic's eye through a panoramic view of Christine's evolving oeuvre against the backdrop of her time (like crop circles perceptible from a vantage point on high), but it could be interesting to explore in which cases contemporary readers may have been presumed to make the conceptual leap from allegory or metaphor to politics to receive the full impact of Christine's message.

This is a highly valuable book for anyone interested in Christine's body of literature as well as the political situation in France during this period. Adams notes that in addition to documenting Christine's true loyalties, she aimed to offer new perspectives on this question and even to inspire further debate about Christine's political stance (p. 10). She has succeeded. It is not every day that a contribution of this significance enters the crowded stage of Christine studies.

Geri L. Smith
U.S. Military Academy, West Point
geri.smith@usma.edu

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172