University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2003

Book Review - Kate Langdon Forhan, The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan

Louise D'Arcens
University of Wollongong, louised@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

D'Arcens, L, Book Review - Kate Langdon Forhan, The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan, Parergon, 20(2), 2003, 189-191.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

It is a pity to find Fergusson still referring to the so-called 'cliff' eastern wall, a straight wall pierced by two levels of triplet windows, as an English concept, and being 'rare in Europe.' In fact, in the north of France it is the most common form.

In small matters, some captions are reversed (e.g. plans 14 and 15) and plans are not arranged with a common orientation, making for obvious difficulties in a complex monastic layout (e.g. 49 and 63).

Aside from these small cavils, this is a splendid study that provides a far more comprehensive description of the claustral buildings and their uses than is usual. Extensive archaeological work has unearthed changes to plans and function that are meticulously described, even to the minute alterations to the fireplaces in the monk's warming room by the kitchens. There are 32 sharply focussed full-page colour illustrations and a number of isometric drawings also in colour that bring a powerful verisimilitude to the reconstructions.

John James
University of New South Wales

Forhan, Kate Langdon, The *Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* (Women and Gender in the Early Modern World), Aldershot, Ashgate, 2002; cloth; pp. 208; 10 b/w illustrations; RRP £45.00; ISBN 0754601730.

Christine de Pizan scholars are familiar with Kate Langdon Forhan's many valuable contributions to the growing research into Christine's political writings. In *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan* Forhan seeks to bring Christine's work to the attention of a new audience, political theorists, in order to ensure a place for her within the mainstream history of political theory. In so doing she continues the worthy task already underway in her translation of Christine's *Book of the Body Politic* for Cambridge's Texts in the History of Political Thought series, and her *Medieval Political Theory* reader, co-edited with Cary Nederman. In this latest book, Forhan's separate insights coalesce into an overarching account of what she argues is a consistent, though evolving, political theory detectable throughout Christine's writings.

This is a more than welcome offering. Forhan not only redresses the oversight of Christine's work within traditional histories of political theory, but also rectifies several abiding misconceptions about medieval political philosophy. Most salutary is her corrective to the assumption among non-medievalists that Machiavelli was the first and only writer to experiment with the Mirror for

Princes genre, which is all too often presented as slavishly conventional in its medieval incarnation. Rather, Christine is presented here as a kind of precursor to Machiavelli, especially in her endorsement of a princely politics of self-interest. Forhan's vision of medieval political theory stresses its complexity, its dynamism, and, in the case of Christine's work, its terrible urgency. Her often gripping account of the social disintegration of fifteenth-century France depicts Christine as a writer whose intense awareness of vulnerability drove her to respond to the mounting chaos engulfing her world. This makes exciting reading for medievalists and non-medievalists alike.

In aiming her work at political theorists Forhan assumes the reader's unfamiliarity with Christine's work, her immediate political and cultural milieu, and medieval political theory. In aiming to introduce the reader to all of these, she sets herself a more formidable task than is perhaps at first apparent. She does an admirable job of outlining the history and significance of the Mirror for Princes genre and the development of the organic metaphor for the state, and of demonstrating Christine's place in the evolution of medieval political theory. Christine's writings are always embedded not only within broader traditions of political thought ranging back to Aristotle, but also within the trends of late medieval political theory. While this approach has the desired effect of presenting Christine as a serious political thinker participating in a continuous tradition, rather than as a female novelty-act, it also has its drawbacks. One of these is that discussion of Christine's writings tends to enter briefly and late in a number of the earlier chapters, only appearing once the context for her work has been elaborated at length. This is compensated for in the meticulous later chapters on Christine's theories of justice, law, peace, and warfare. Nevertheless, the piecemeal presentation of Christine's work in the earlier chapters creates a disjointed effect that tends to work against Forhan's stated aim of demonstrating a coherent political theory unfolding in Christine's work.

It is perhaps unfair, given Forhan's projected audience, to protest that the political content of Christine's writing is occasionally stressed at the expense of its literary form. Nevertheless it seems to me that a book such as this offers an ideal forum for introducing an audience of political theorists to the ways in which writers' literary decisions are also often deeply political decisions. This point is well-served in Forhan's discussion of the corporeal metaphor, which is both political and literary; but elsewhere Christine's choice of prose, verse, allegory, or epistle goes largely unremarked, with the result that the political message seems untethered from its literary medium. Similarly, while Forhan's

emphasis on procedural politics understandably necessitates downplaying Christine's interest in sexual politics, it would have been refreshing to have seen Christine's remarkable formulations of female political agency given a more central place by Forhan, both within Christine's *oeuvre* and, by extension, in the history of political theory.

Forhan writes in a prose that is limpid and uncluttered, yet still manages to incorporate the terminology of medieval political theory with precision. She negotiates with apparent (and surely deceptive) ease the finer points of the medieval theorists she examines and demonstrates a real talent for extracting from them the points most fundamental to her argument. There are some redundancies, and the prose occasionally gives the impression of being incompletely edited, with some evidence of former drafts creeping into the final text (eg. 'no medieval political theorist was wrote in a vacuum'; p. 43). Errors are mostly inoffensive but are occasionally distracting (as when one book is described as the 'companion peace' of another).

The concluding discussion of Christine's understanding of vulnerability evinces Forhan's enormous sympathy for her subject, a sympathy that nevertheless remains even-handed and sensitive to the aspects of Christine's political theory that perplex modern readers. She subtly addresses the question of Christine's much-debated conservatism without being an apologist for her social elitism or the less palatable elements of her nationalism.

In sum, Forhan makes a compelling case for Christine's political texts as responses to her volatile circumstances, and for Christine as a significant voice in the history of political theory. I look forward to this book having the impact it deserves in the discipline of political theory, and in medieval studies.

Louise D'Arcens
English Studies Program
University of Wollongong

Gallagher, Catherine and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000; paper; pp. ix, 249; 12 b/w illustrations; RRP US$14.00; ISBN 0226279359.

In the first chapter, new historicist approaches are defined as attempts at revealing 'both the invisible cohesion and the half-realized conflicts in specific cultures' through an opening of the perspective to 'particular times and places'