

Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson on the Body Politic:
The Limits of Intellectual Influence?

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There is a large and established body of scholarly literature that demonstrates the existence of an intellectual relationship between the influential churchman and theologian Jean Gerson and the poet-courtier Christine de Pizan. As virtual contemporaries who both moved in the courtly circles of Charles VI, it should hardly be surprising that they had mutual friends (such as the older Philippe de Mèzières) and overlapping political interests (especially, a shared concern about the precarious political stability of France). Somewhat more startling is their shared opposition to the misogyny of Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*; when Christine produced her refutation of that poem (entitled *Epistre au dieu d'amours*) that sparked a wide-ranging controversy among many leading *fin-de-siècle* French intellectuals, Gerson sided definitively with her. A series of studies have begun to marshal evidence in support of sustained intellectual ties between the two, culminating in Earl Jeffrey Richard's recent conclusion that their relationship should be classified as "a close intellectual friendship."¹ Yet one still wonders: was it a friendship between true intellectual equals—such as Constant Mews has lately ascribed to Abelard and Heloise in the twelfth century—or instead one of master and student (or the literary version of knight and damsel)? The impression one receives from the current scholarship suggests mainly the latter, namely, that where intellectual relations between Christine and Jean can be concretely discerned, the flow runs uni-directionally from the Parisian chancellor to the woman writer. After all, Gerson was far more widely read in Latin literature—theological, philosophical, and didactic—than

Christine (there being lingering controversy about the extent of her knowledge of languages beyond sources in the vernacular). He seems highly qualified to aid her in her studies and direct her to writings and thinkers of use to her; as someone lacking a formal scholastic education, she was hardly well positioned to reciprocate.

The present paper represents a small attempt to test competing hypotheses about the substance of the intellectual friendship between Christine and Jean by examining one overlapping theme in their respective body of writings: the organic metaphor between the human body and the political community. Both writers had considerable opportunity to deploy the body politic trope in their works, given the fluid and even chaotic nature of French politics in their day and the consequent need to conceptualize political order. In this regard, Christine perhaps deserves the greater credit and attention. She was the only political author of medieval or early modern Europe of whom I am aware who designed an entire book—the *Livres de Corps de Policie* (1406)—around the theme of the body politic. Gerson's use of the organic metaphor was more diffuse: it shows up in some of his most famous political sermons before the French court, and also in a 1419 letter to the tutor of the Dauphin. The sources on which both relied for the body politic were essentially identical: John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, which had been translated into French by Denis Foulechat in 1372; and Nicole Oresme's French-language translation of and commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*. Of course, Gerson would have access to these materials in Latin as well as French versions—the question is open with regard to Christine—but he seems to have known and relied heavily on the vernacular texts. I propose to examine whether there is any detectable cross-fertilization between Christine's and Gerson's particular uses of the metaphor, or whether instead they were completely separate and independent in their deployment of the analogy.

Christine's Body Politic

In previous articles, I have argued that the recurrent utilization of the corporeal analogy during the later Middle Ages as a means through which to express principles of equilibrium and equity, instead of hierarchy and subordination, reveals just how expansive the image was in pre-modern times.² The application of the metaphor in a fundamentally anti-hierarchical fashion highlights the opportunities for confounding and even subverting more traditional versions of the body politic. This general contention is well supported in the case of the *Corps de Policie*. In the *Corps de Policie*, Christine de Pizan's presentation of the body politic certainly reflects and elaborates an emphasis on equilibrium and the consequent denial of hierocratic implications. In general, her work demonstrated deep concern about the needs and interests of a large portions of the populace—among them women, city-dwellers, and the poor—by insisting upon the inescapable reciprocity of the relationship between the French people and the royal regime. Christine's thought is thus characterized by the striking inclusiveness of the audience she addresses and the social complexity she acknowledges. In one of her two works directed explicitly to a female readership, the *Cité des dames* (1405), she defends women as a group from various slanders against their intelligence and capacity to achieve moral and political virtue. The other of these writings, the *Trois vertus* (1406), examines in minute detail the conduct appropriate to women of each and every social distinction, extending from princesses and the nobility to artisans, prostitutes, and the destitute. Likewise, Christine's *Livre de corps de Policie* discusses in detail the humbler orders within the realm, such as the commercial and working classes, rather than simply the education and behavior of the king and his well-born companions.

Despite opening *Le Livre de corps de Policie* with a nearly verbatim description of John of Salisbury's version of the organic metaphor,³ Christine constructs harmonious social organization

and cooperation in an eclectic manner. While she declares that “everyone should come together as one body of the same polity, to live justly and in peace as they ought,”⁴ the image of the animated organism also suggests to her an inclusive, reciprocal, and interdependent conception of community.

Just as the human body is not whole, but defective and deformed, when it lacks any of its members, so the body politic cannot be perfect, whole, or healthy if all the estates of which we speak are not well joined and united together. Thus, they can aid and help each other, each exercising its own office, which diverse offices ought to serve only for the conservation of the whole community, just as the members of the body aid to guide and nourish the whole body.⁵

Christine’s image of communal order foregrounds the preservation of the health of the entire public unit through the mutual coordination of the tasks necessary for its existence.⁶ To despise any of the members, or reduce them to a state of servitude, is an attack on the well-being of the whole organism.

Christine’s use of the organic metaphor extends medieval precedent by imputing to it a noticeably anti-clerical orientation. Unlike John’s *Policraticus*, she makes no reference to the religious life as the “soul” of the body nor does she draw upon standard medieval depictions of the supremacy of the church to the temporal sphere. Of course, she expects that the king will honor God and care for the churches within his jurisdiction. But the *Corps de Policie* reverses conventional expectations by, for instance, asserting a corrective role for the good ruler, since no “prelate, priest, or cleric is so great that he will dare withstand or complain about the prince who reproves him for his manifest vice or sin.”⁷ This is consistent with Christine’s conception that all the estates within the realm, including the priesthood, must submit to the communal good and her

identification of the clergy within the body politic as one of the three branches of the common people.⁸ Clearly, her organic model disposes her to count the priestly function as essentially a civil office, contributing to an idea of public welfare in which salvation and moral rectitude were not the sole aims of government.

Christine's considerable sympathy both for the contributions made by the "humbler" classes and for the plight arising from their varied tasks constitutes a central theme of *Corps de Policie*. She insists that burghers and men of commerce are not to be disdained, at least if they are honest and knowledgeable in the conduct of their affairs.⁹

The merchant class is very necessary, and without it neither the estate of kings and princes nor even the polities of cities and countries could exist. For by the industry of their labor, all kinds of people are provided for without having to make everything themselves, because, if they have money, merchants bring from afar all things necessary and proper for their lives.¹⁰

Christine's commendation of merchants is noteworthy, in particular, for its assumption of the importance of the economic well-being of citizens. Traders provide an extremely useful social service, permitting a more efficient use of labor than would be otherwise possible. "It is very good for a country and of great value for a prince and to the common polity," she maintains, "when a city has trade and an abundance of merchants."¹¹ Such persons "in many countries are held in high esteem" on account of "the good they do for everyone."¹² In a quintessential example of organic reciprocity, Christine holds that all classes benefit when commercial society is permitted and encouraged to flourish.

In similar terms, Christine praises craftsmen and peasants, since "if the republic excluded laborers and artisans, it could not sustain itself."¹³ Indeed, she defends both groups against the

ignominy that is heaped upon them. She remarks, “Although some think little of the office of the craftsmen that the clerics call ‘artisans,’ yet it is good, noble, and necessary”; likewise, “the estate of the simple laborer or others of low rank should not be denigrated, as others would do. . . The estate of the poor which everyone despises has many good and worthy persons in purity of life.”¹⁴ Again, Christine reasons from the necessity of the activities performed by artisans and day laborers for meeting the physical needs occasioned by human existence to the conclusion that their work must be valued by society. “The varied jobs that the artisans do are necessary for the human body and it cannot do without them. . . [Laborers] support the body of every person with their labor. They do nothing that is unpraiseworthy.”¹⁵ One’s material contribution to the physical sustenance of the community is thus to be factored heavily into the determination of social inclusion. Judgments may be made about how well individuals perform in their diverse offices, but no office in and of itself is to be demeaned or disdained if it contributes a vital function to the material welfare of the community.

The principle of organic equilibrium and reciprocity imposed a large burden of responsibility upon the prince, in turn, to ensure that the realm is maintained and enhanced, as well as to oversee the efficient coordination of the tasks necessary for the survival of the body politic. Christine declares that the ruler

ought to desire that his subjects perform their best in whatever office God has placed them. . . Each one, whatever his rank, ought to live by good policy, without extortion or overcharging, so that each may live properly under him [the prince], and that they love him as a good prince ought to be loved by his people. . .¹⁶

A central duty of government, then, is to uphold the legal and social structures that permit private economic relations between individuals, that is, to protect against force and fraud. The king is to

guarantee that nothing interrupts or deflects subjects from performing the various tasks necessary for the realization of the public good. This implies, moreover, that the ruler must appreciate the various duties that contribute to the health of the body, and must be cognizant of the conditions of all estates.

He ought to hear sometimes about the common people, laborers, and merchants, how they make their profit from the poor and the rich, and similarly all kinds of things, so that his understanding is not found ignorant of anything that can be virtuously known.¹⁷

Familiarity with the full range of functions needed to sustain a living organism does not breed contempt toward government. Rather, the prince who completely grasps the tasks assigned to the range of orders for the sake of the health of the realm will be prepared to guide and govern the totality knowledgeably and competently.

Perhaps the most important consequence of a harmonious organic balance is an understanding by the governors of the impact of their official policies on the conditions of the community. For example, Christine points out how soldiers “pillage and despoil the country,” leading directly to economic hardship on the part of the rural poor, because they are inadequately compensated by government. “If soldiers were well paid,” she observes, “one could restrict them on pain of punishment to take nothing without paying for it, and by this they could find provisions and everything that they needed economically and plentifully.”¹⁸ Likewise, the king must weigh the consequences of his taxation schemes. Christine does not deny the legitimacy of taxing subjects to meet public needs.¹⁹ But he must be guided by the principle of gathering only “the legal revenue that it is reasonable to collect and take from his country, without gnawing to the bone his poor commoners.”²⁰ Christine objects, in particular, to the inequities of royal taxation policies, which

exempt the rich while burdening the poor disproportionately. It is not merely that such schemes are unjust, but that they have materially deleterious effects upon those who are already impoverished: “There are some who come to pay this money imposed on them and then they and their poor household starve afterwards, and sell their beds and other poor possessions cheaply and for nothing. And it would please God if someone informed the king and noble princes.”²¹ As a consequence of the organic unity of the realm, the ruler must realize that his own actions may directly harm the material well-being of his subjects, which in the end will only redound to his own injury, since the people’s despoilment means that the realm itself will become impoverished and will generate less income in the future. Christine takes it as axiomatic that wise “princes would rather be poor in a rich country, than to be rich and have plenty in a poor country.”²² This is not merely a moral principle; it reflects an economic doctrine that naturally follows from an organic conception of communal interdependence. A balanced body politic is one in which government frames all of its policies with consideration for their consequences upon the sum of the members of society, and especially upon those who are most vulnerable to the use of power and least able to protect themselves.

Jean Gerson’s Body

Christine de Pizan has been reviled by some modern feminist critics precisely for her appropriation of the traditional image of the body politic. Foremost among these is Sheila Delany, who somewhat infamously proposed that Christine’s use of the bodily metaphor signaled her essential conservatism: “By the fifteenth century this model was sadly outmoded . . . In a time when even courtiers and clerics wanted change, Christine continues in her quiet neo-Platonic hierarchies and her feudal nostalgia.”²³ On this account, the *Corps de Policie* is deemed wholly

unoriginal and retrograde on its own terms, a mere regurgitation of “male-stream” political ideas that justify a politics of subordination-and-rule. Hence, Christine is relegated to a minor place in the history of Western political ideas generally, without making a significant contribution to a major discourse in that tradition.

Is this condemnation fair? One way to judge is by comparing the terms of her version of the metaphor to those of her contemporary, Jean Gerson. Gerson had used the organic analogy as a way of conceptualizing the political order in general, and the kingdom of France in particular, at least as early as 1391, when he drew on it in a vernacular sermon preached before the royal court known by the incipit “Adorabunt eum.”²⁴ He continued to employ it as late as his letter of advice concerning the instruction of the Dauphin, dated to 1419.²⁵ But his most extensive elucidation of the body politic may be found in another of his French language sermons, *Vivat rex*, often considered to be the most important statement of his temporal political views. *Vivat rex* also originated as a sermon directed to King Charles VI and his entourage, preached on November 7, 1405, in other words, virtually simultaneous to Christine’s composition of her major works of political theory. *Vivat rex* therefore forms an especially useful counterpoint to Christine’s reflections on the body politic.

On the face of it, there are clear similarities between the *Corps de Policie* and *Vivat rex*. Christine’s work was organized according to a tripartite scheme: its three chapters addressed first the head, then the knights and nobles, and finally the common people. Gerson likewise invokes a three-part structure to organize the community. Christine, as we have seen, places a premium on reciprocity between head and members as the central unifying principle of the body. In a similar vein, Gerson declares in *Vivat rex* that “because a king cannot endure for long nor reasonably live without subjects and subjects in the same way without a king, accord is necessary ...”²⁶ Yet these

resemblances are largely superficial when one examines them more carefully. Where Christine's orientation is practical, naturalistic, and largely non-theological, Gerson's vision of the body politic is steeped in a metaphysical system that posits the place of the earthly community within an overarching order of divine creation. *Vivat rex* postulates that the king presides as a microcosm of the triple purposes of his kingdom: the eternal, the corporeal, and the civil and political.²⁷ These three purposes coincide and overlap in the divine order: physical existence makes possible the communal goods of the political regime, which in turn exist in order to serve the ends of salvation. The king as the primary guarantor of the civil realm thus simultaneously inhabits and participates in three bodies: his own material existence, his incarnation of the political community, and the *corpus mysticum* of Christian believers. Gerson thus entangles the body politic in a vast ordering of human experience beyond merely earthly politics, placing the king not just at the center of moral order but at the core of a salvational design.

Obviously, Gerson's body politic is king-centered to a very high degree. The order he envisages depends entirely upon the cultivation of the king's moral and spiritual condition: the possibility of "union" among the members depends upon his possession of the "four virtues" of prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice, as well as "the divine operation of the Holy Spirit which creates conciliation in the mystical body."²⁸ *Vivat rex* thus devolves into conventional moral advice, on the assumption that the good and godly king will serve his people and will in turn be loved by them. Mutual and reciprocal relations are a matter of subordination and service in the manner of feudal relations:

Thus it is by the assignment of nature that all of the members of a true body expose themselves for the health of the head, paralleling what the true subjects of the mystical body ought to do for their lord. But in this way, too, the part of the head ought to address and

govern the other members. For the others are to be spared destruction; properly, for the head without the body cannot endure. ... Just as the subjects owe faith, subsidy and service to their lord, so the lord owes faith, protection and defense to his subjects.²⁹

It is precisely the result of the exercise of the virtues of the king that he will provide such functions for the populace over whom he rules, in turn for which he will enjoy loyal subjects. This is the essence of a healthy body politic. Likewise, tyranny, Gerson insists, leads to the poisoning or dismemberment of the body, since the lack of virtue on the part of the ruler leads to a withdrawal of subservience on the part of the people.³⁰ A tyrannous body cannot long survive.

Vivat rex concentrates the remainder of its attention on how the virtues of the king are realized in his administration. Prudence exists when flattery and dissemblance are replaced by honest and wise counsel.³¹ Fortitude is present when knights and soldiers guard the kingdom and do not oppress the people.³² Justice is realized when the king's officials enforce and obey the law.³³ Finally, the body attains temperance when the conduct of the great lords and prelates is regulated so as to constrain their "outrages," that is, excessive forms of behavior that threaten the good governance of the realm.³⁴ Gerson devotes only one paragraph in *Vivat rex* to the plight of "mechanical workers" and "merchants," and only then to draw attention to what he regards as the inequities of the wealthy escaping royal taxes while the poor are impoverished.³⁵ In sum, Gerson concerns himself overwhelmingly with the king's relations with the nobility and great men of the realm, and with stabilizing the fraught condition of the aristocratic orders. Despite the fact that Gerson originated from a humble background,³⁶ *Vivat rex* operates entirely in the realm of elite privilege and evinces no sustained awareness of the politically excluded segments of society.

Although the king requires all of these virtues to maintain the body of the civil community, they are but a prelude to "the good spiritual life," an account of which rounds off *Vivat rex*. The

king must submit himself not only to God, but to His Church and its ministers. The royal responsibility extends to the enforcement of Christian doctrine in its temporal aspects and the elimination of those who are enemies of the Word and the Church.³⁷ Gerson leaves no doubt that the clergy is a separate and authoritative force: it is one of the three primary “estates,” along with “l’estat de chevalrie” and “l’estat de bourgeoisie.”³⁸ In offering this social classification, of course, Gerson harkens back to the conventional tripartite medieval distinction between those who pray, fight, and work—an idea that would continue to grip the organization of French social life until the Revolution. Thus, the king in *Vivat rex* is not merely a divine servant, but ultimately an agent of the Church the eternal fate of whom depends upon his deference to clerical dictates. Although Gerson never describes the clergy as the “soul” of the body, he certainly leaves no doubt that the immortal soul of the ruler requires his communion with the mystical body.

Conclusion

Was Christine de Pizan familiar with Gerson’s *Vivat rex* either directly or indirectly? Might the *Corps de Policie* be viewed even as a response to Gerson’s conception of the body politic? Even if Richards’s postulation of a “close intellectual friendship” between the two is sustained, it will probably remain impossible to answer these questions. However, given that the circumstances for the composition of the *Corps de Policie* are far less settled than for many of her other writings—it is presumed to have been written for the instruction of the Dauphin Louis, but at whose instigation is unknown—there remains the intriguing possibility that she was at least partially commenting on the limitations of Gerson’s ideas. More crucially, reading Christine’s account of the body politic against the background of *Vivat rex* illuminates boldly the novelty of her approach. Where Gerson remains firmly wedded to moral and spiritual solutions to the political

problems of misrule and instability, Christine is prepared to consider the matter from a more pragmatic stance (without, however, dismissing the need for moral instruction and inculcation). (Indeed, there is another interesting paper to be written contrasting the role of royal virtue and the virtues in Christine's and Gerson's political works.) Christine is attuned to the importance of growing social complexity in France, and indeed throughout Europe, and open to the increasingly vibrant and influential role played by the so-called common people in public life. By contrast, Gerson is, if not hostile, then largely indifferent to offices and identities that are non-noble in status. Christine subsumes the church, or at any rate the clergy, clearly under the control of the temporal governor; Gerson locates the ecclesiastical sphere more traditionally outside the direct legislative and judicial regulation of the secular realm. Christine and Gerson may have known and relied upon the same sources, such as John of Salisbury and Oresme, but they could hardly have deployed them more differently. Not only does this illustrate my longstanding argument that the so-called organic analogy was multiple and diverse in its applications, but it also contributes to the plausibility that Christine needs to be written more centrally into the history of Western political thought, while figures like Gerson may be relegated to a more marginal role.

Notes

¹ Earl Jeffrey Richards, “Christine de Pizan and Jean Gerson: An Intellectual Friendship,” in *Christine de Pizan 2000*, ed. John Campbell and Nadia Margolis (Amsterdam: Ridopi, 2000), pp. 197-208, at p. 207. For some other important scholarship on the subject, see: Deborah Fraioli, “The Literary Image of Joan of Arc: Prior Influences,” *Speculum* 56 (1981), pp. 811-830, at pp. 813-817; Jacques Krynen, *L’idéal du prince et pouvoir royal en France à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Picard, 1981); Nathalie Nabert, “Christine de Pizan, Jean Gerson et le gouvernement des âmes,” in *Au champs des escriptures*, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris: Champion, 2000), pp. 251-268.

² “Body Politics: The Diversification of the Organic Metaphor at the End of the Middle Ages,” *Pensiero Politico Politico* 2 (2004), pp. 59-87; “The Living Body Politic: The Diversification of Organic Metaphors in Nicole Oresme and Christine de Pizan,” in *Healing the Body Politic*, ed. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews (Tunhout: Brepols, 2005), pp. 19-33.

³ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, trans. Kate Langdon Forhan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 4. Hereafter BBP.

⁴ BBP, p. 59.

⁵ BBP, p. 90.

⁶ BBP, p. 91.

⁷ BBP, p. 14.

⁸ BBP, pp. 19, 95-99.

⁹ BBP, p. 104.

¹⁰ BBP, p. 103.

¹¹ BBP, p. 104.

¹² BBP, pp. 103-104.

¹³ BBP, p. 105.

¹⁴ BBP, pp. 105, 108, 109

¹⁵ BBP, pp. 105, 107.

¹⁶ BBP, p. 40.

¹⁷ BBP, p. 10.

¹⁸ BBP, p. 17

¹⁹ BBP, pp. 19-20.

²⁰ BBP, p. 19.

²¹ BBP, p. 20.

²² BBP, p. 22.

²³ Shiela Delany, "Mothers to Think Back Through: Who are They? The Ambiguous Example of Christine de Pizan," in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 188.

²⁴ Jean Gerson, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Ph. Glorieux, 10 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1960-1968), 7.2, pp. 519-538. Hereafter OC. All translations mine.

²⁵ OC, 2, pp. 203-215.

²⁶ OC, 2, p. 1160.

²⁷ OC, 7.2, p. 1144.

²⁸ OC, 7.2., p. 1160.

²⁹ OC, 7.2, p. 1155.

³⁰ OC, 7.2., pp. 1156-1159.

³¹ OC, 7.2, pp. 1161-1168.

³² OC, 7.2, pp. 1168-1171.

³³ OC, 7.2., pp. 1172-1175.

³⁴ OC, 7.2., pp. 1175-1180.

³⁵ OC, 7.2., pp. 1178-1179.

³⁶ See Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

³⁷ OC, 7.2., pp. 1180-1184.

³⁸ OC, 7.2., p. 1151.