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Brief Biography:

Sophie Bourgault is Assistant Professor at the School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa. Current research interests gravitate around feminist political theory, French Enlightenment thought, and the ethics of care and hospitality. She is the co-editor of an edited volume on Enlightenment thought (Brill, 2013) and is currently working on an edited volume on feminist care ethics. In addition to journal articles on ancient and 18th century political philosophy, her publications also include articles on Simone Weil's political thought and on Mme de Genlis' defense of hospitality (forthcoming in Women's Studies).

Paper Title:

Women writers and the canon: reflections on the case of Christine de Pizan (Part of Panel 2: In Defense of a Canon in the History of Political Thought through a Consideration of the Work of Christine de Pizan)

Paper Abstract:

In the scholarship of the history of political thought, the work of Quentin Skinner and his followers, sometimes collectively termed ‘The Cambridge School’, has for over five decades questioned the notion of a central canon in the discipline. The methods of contextual understanding pursued by Skinner, while often focused on the work of figures such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, have linked their intellectual production to more broadly identifiable intellectual and ideological notions, such as republicanism, anti-republicanism, the state and liberty. It could be suggested that the ultimate purpose of couching the argumentation is to transcend the notion of a canon as a key methodological feature of the discipline. Indeed, Skinner has articulated this very conclusion. In light of this important approach in the discipline of the history of political thought, the purpose of this panel is to embark on a defense of the notion of a canon and canonical texts in the discipline through a particular consideration of the work of Christine de Pizan (1364-1429). Pizan’s work offers particular significance to scholars in the history of political thought, in part because of the breadth of her scholarship and in part because of her association with a defense of women. In this panel, we seek to argue that the importance of Pizan can only effectively be highlighted through an emphasis on her role as an individual thinker, as opposed to the varying schools of thought with which she may be associated.
As the first professional woman of letters in France and as a defender of the historical accomplishments of women in her Book of the City of Ladies (1405) Pizan is often identified as a preeminent figure in the history of feminist thought. However, through this same lens her contributions to the ideological and argumentative liberation of women may appear to be somewhat compromised by her acquiescence to a domestic role for women and her rejection of the need for women to pursue careers within the public realm. Her relation to a tradition of feminist thought is not an unproblematic one. In this context, then, a focus on a broad ideological trend as opposed to the individual contribution may lead to a somewhat anachronistic and pre-emptive judgement on the significance of her thought. From another perspective, the wide-ranging nature of her reflection, from conditions for peace (such as The Book of Peace written in the wake of years of conflict within France) to a critique of the courtly love literary tradition (in her contribution to the debate on the Roman de la Rose) cannot be fully made sense of through recourse to any one singular ideological cause or set of ideas. A focus away from the thinker and towards the development of conceptual frameworks in historical context could only diminish our appreciation of the complexity and accomplishments of this singular thinker. In addition, Pizan herself understood part of her scholarly project as working to undermine a canon which appeared to malign women and their potential and contributions to the social and political good. In broad terms, then, the two papers which form this panel will provide defenses of the need to study the work of Pizan in its own right and as the product of an original mind.

The first paper to be presented by Sophie Bourgault (Assistant Professor of Political Science of the University of Ottawa) seeks to explore the work of Pizan through the lens of contemporary approaches to feminism. Her paper entitled “Women writers and the canon: reflections on the case of Christine de Pizan,” begins with the acknowledgement that since the 1960s there has been a great deal of work done by scholars ingender studies to unearth forgotten female writers and philosophers. There are, no doubt, numerous laudable aims driving this gender-oriented scholarship. Nevertheless, rehabilitating past women writers—especially with the purpose of presenting them as feminist writers—raises complex questions regarding the competing claims of historical accuracy, pedagogical aims in the modern classroom and feminist emancipatory politics.

As she suggests, perhaps nowhere are these competing claims more in tension than in the case of Christine de Pizan, author of The Book of the City of Ladies. Bourgault’s paper, then, seeks to reflect on the fairly successful rehabilitation of Christine de Pizan since the 1960s and also on her controversial insertion within the canon of feminist political theory. While she agrees with Charity C. Willard that Pizan has a feminine utopia to propose and a vision of politics that might give new life to our slightly tired contemporary debates (such as the one between care and justice), she will nevertheless take seriously Sheila Delany’s passionate warning against rehabilitating women writers from the past unhistorically. Reconciling the slightly contradictory demands of contemporary relevance, feminism and historical accuracy in the case of Pizan is possible, she argues, but it certainly calls for great attention to nuance. At a minimum, it calls for a sustained questioning of the often articulated claims that Pizan was “revolutionary” and “profoundly feminist”. What she underscores is that Pizan’s
work is of great importance precisely because it is difficult to reconcile with most of our modern preoccupations. Paradoxically, it can only speak to us if we take seriously its alterity.

The second paper in the panel by Rebecca Kingston (Associate Professor of Political Science of the University of Toronto) will reflect on the work of Pizan in the context of a broader tradition of thinking in the history of political thought. She will explore in particular some of the uniqueness of Pizan’s reflections in relation to the later reflections of Machiavelli, especially with regard to a consideration of the heroes and heroines of classical history and to the types of social and political contributions that are considered to be most valuable for the development of civil life. The point of this paper entitled “Pizan and political theory as anti-ideological” will be to show that we should begin to understand Pizan through her own conception of her project which was in part to challenge existing traditions of political argument, especially in relation to women. By taking seriously Pizan’s claims to a certain originality, and in applying this to her relation to past thinkers as well as subsequent thinkers in the tradition of the history of political thought, we can begin to see a broader justification of a canonical approach to the study of the history of political ideas.