4. **Literary Lessons in Queenship and Power**

Mary Tudor Brandon and the Authority of the Ambassador-Queen

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**Abstract**

Mary Tudor Brandon, Henry VIII’s sister, married Louis XII to cement an Anglo-French alliance. As an ambassador-queen, she knew that typical political maneuvering would be exacerbated by the possibility that she might give Louis an heir. Her letters reveal the setbacks she faced in crafting alliances and the ways she attempted to leverage power. Mary’s reading, especially works by Christine de Pizan, provided multiple models of queenship, rhetorical strategies women might employ to exercise political power, and a sense of the value of female alliances and wisdom, as well as the limits of queenly authority and the importance of relationships. This essay explores Mary’s attempts to negotiate stronger agency, positioning herself to exercise power in both French and English courts.

**Keywords:** Mary Tudor Brandon, diplomacy, queenship, cultural patronage, letters

*The proper role of a good, wise queen or princess is to maintain peace and concord and to avoid wars and their resulting disasters. Women particularly should concern themselves with peace because men by nature are more foolhardy and headstrong.*

— Christine de Pizan

1 Pizan, *Book of Three Virtues*, as translated by Willard (p. 86); hereafter Pizan, 1989b. ‘le droit office de sage et bonne royne et princepce d’estre moyenne de paix et de concorde, et de travaillier que guerre soit eschivee pour les inconveniens qui avenir en peut. Et ad ce doivent*
In her 1405 conduct book for women, *The Book of Three Virtues*, Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–c. 1430) argued that a queen’s primary duty was to act as peacemaker. Given the combination of women’s innate gentleness and foresight to see the inevitable dangers of war, a good queen would help her husband govern well, keeping his subjects happy, or tactfully soothe quarrels at court, especially between her husband and any fractious nobles. Should another realm attack, she would do all she honorably could to forestall the war. The subjects of a realm blessed with such a queen, Christine argues, will see her ‘not only as their mistress but almost as the goddess on earth in whom they have infinite hope and confidence’.\(^2\) Given longstanding Anglo-French conflict and the turmoil exacerbated by the intermittent bouts of madness of Charles VI (1368–1422) and resulting power struggles between his relatives, Christine’s estimation of the value of a queen who could mediate effectively is understandable.

In *Three Virtues*, Christine had clearly designed both a practical handbook and a pointed commentary on the immediate political situation in France.\(^3\) Yet how long and in what ways did her influence persist in the courts of Europe? One case study may be found in the brief tenure of Mary Tudor Brandon (1496–1533), younger sister of Henry VIII (1491–1547), as queen of France. Examining Mary’s connection to Christine’s works and her actions at the French court reveals that Christine’s advice remained realistic, accessible, and applicable into the sixteenth century.

The poetry celebrating Mary’s marriage to Louis XII (1462–1515) echoes Christine’s rhetoric in elevating a peace-making queen to quasi-divine status. When she entered France, Mary was welcomed by a series of pageants, the most elaborate in Paris, where the fountains were made to spout wine and stages were constructed to hold ships with singers in the rigging lauding Mary. The poet Pierre Gringore (c. 1475–c. 1538) proclaimed:

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\text{As the peace between God and mankind} \\
\text{By the means of the Virgin Mary} \\
\text{Was already made, so now are}
\]

\(^1\) Piran, 1989a, p. 35.
\(^2\) Piran, 1989b, p. 87; ‘non mie seulement comme a leur maistresse, mais ce semble a leur deesse en terre, en qui ilz ont souveraine esperance et fiance’, Piran, 1989a, p. 36.
\(^3\) Adams contends that Christine intended several works, including *Three Virtues*, to serve as arguments that Isabeau of Bavaria (1370–1475) should be regent for her husband Charles IV (1368–1422).
We French relieved of our burdens
For Mary is married among us again.⁴

Accompanied by two thousand English nobles and greeted by French spectacle and cheering crowds, Mary was the living symbol of the peace between the two countries, which had been at war once again.

This particular Anglo-French conflict arose within the context of general sixteenth-century jockeying for primacy in Europe. Henry, with Ferdinand II of Spain (1452–1516) and Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519), had joined the Holy League of the Pope Julius II (1441–1513) in an effort to check Louis's territorial ambitions in Italy. At the time, Mary was betrothed to Charles, Prince of Castile (1500–1558), a match arranged as part of a campaign to create a strong alliance between England, Spain, and the Low Countries. By 1513, Henry had had success in battle, capturing the towns of Thérouanne and Tournai in the north of France while English troops triumphed against the Scots at Flodden. Maximilian, impressed with England's resources, agreed to hold Mary and his grandson Charles's wedding in May 1515. However, Louis opened secret negotiations with Ferdinand and Maximilian, who delayed the marriage once more. In disgust at his allies' underhanded dealings, Henry reversed course and made peace with Louis, offering his eighteen-year-old sister Mary to the recently-widowed fifty-two-year-old French king as part of the alliance.

Yet Mary was no mere symbol. She was a woman facing the sobering reality of such a role. England's peace with France was new and fragile, with negotiations over French hostages captured in battle still to be arranged. England's existing ties were with Spain, through Henry’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), and, since age eleven, Mary had been preparing to become the bride of a Spanish Habsburg prince. Now she had to alter her mindset to accommodate French fashion, culture, and a potentially hostile French court. In particular, Mary knew that if she bore Louis a son, he would supplant the current dauphin, François d'Angoulême (1494–1547), Louis's cousin and son-in-law, who, together with his mother Louise de Savoie (1476–1531) and sister Marguerite (1492–1549), represented a powerful faction in the French nobility. On a personal level, she confronted the prospect of marriage to an old husband who was reportedly ill with gout. Through her close relationship with Catherine of Aragon, who was

⁴ ‘Comme la paix entre dieu & les hommes / Par le moyen de la vierge marie, / Fus jadis faicte ainsi a present sommes / Bourgoys francoys desrangez de nos sommes / Car marie avec nous se marie’, Baskervill, p. 15.
welcomed enthusiastically to England as bride of Prince Arthur (1486–1502), then largely ignored as his widow, only to rise to power again as Henry’s queen, Mary would have understood the precariousness of her position in the French court.

Nonetheless, Mary had been groomed by her father and grandmother, Margaret Beaufort (1443–1509), to meet such challenges; she had been immersed in the rhetoric of chivalric spectacle from an early age and knew how to wield its tools to her own advantage. She was well educated; her tutor would publish a book outlining the precepts he had used with her, including a program of reading a wide range of medieval French and English literature. In particular, Mary would have known the works of Christine de Pizan, especially the Epistle of Othea and Book of the City of Ladies and almost certainly the Book of the Three Virtues.

Mary’s reading would have provided her with multiple models of queenship and the rhetorical strategies women might employ. However, her books would also have taught the limits of queenly authority, and how much her influence rested on the strength of her relationships with Henry and Louis. Mary was a unique figure on whom both courts could call for favors, effectively making her an ambassador-queen occupying the liminal space between realms. Therefore she had to foster quickly the appearance of a loving marriage and devise close ties with her new courtiers, all while sustaining her familial connection with Henry.

With regard to politics, Mary understood the importance of her role as a symbol of peace. Hers was a society that valued rhetorical spectacle, and she was prepared to play her part by writing letters grounded in the rhetoric of affection and by engaging in behaviors that would paint an image of a close familial bond between Henry and Louis. The warmer their relationship, the more likely it was that they would honor one another’s calls for military aid or diplomacy. For this reason Mary, Henry, and Louis take great pains in their letters to emphasize their love for one another and thereby project the impression of a firm alliance to other European kingdoms.

At the same time, the Tudor princess also understood that her role as peace-making queen was more than symbolic. Indeed, when renouncing her betrothal to the Spanish prince Charles, Mary claimed she did so because Charles’s advisers had poisoned his opinion of Henry and that she would be unable to marry a man so alienated from her brother. She preferred to

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5 For Mary’s education in epistolary rhetoric and spectacle, see Sadlack, which includes an edition of Mary’s letters. Spelling of Mary’s letters modernized in this essay.
6 Sadlack, pp. 51–52; Rymer, p. 63.
marry where she could serve both Henry and her spouse. Mary's actions as French queen underscore the seriousness of her desire to be an effective intermediary; from the outset she worked to foster the growth of a genuinely close working relationship between her husband and brother by facilitating the exchange of favors between the two courts. Mary's example demonstrates how an early modern queen, as sister to one monarch and wife to another, had a unique power to strengthen alliances between countries.

By establishing her value to Louis politically and through her personal attentions to him, Mary could increase her influence on him and in turn, increase her authority, whether to obtain patronage for her favorites, to achieve personal ends, or to intercede on behalf of her subjects. Intercession was yet another traditional queenly role, as Mary was reminded when her coronation ceremonies invoked the example of the biblical Queen Esther persuading her husband the king to grant her people mercy. Records demonstrate that during Mary's short stay in France, she sought the release of prisoners in England and France, and preferment for various individuals.

Such actions would both earn gratitude and enhance her reputation as a benevolent queen. In an age where rhetorical spectacle both symbolized and enhanced one's power, Mary recognized the value of such a reputation.

Mary's reading and experience at the English and French courts taught her that her status, reputation, political allies, and influence were conduits for the power necessary to safeguard her future. Maintaining warm, loving relationships with her husband and brother, while garnering additional friends at court, would help ensure that Mary was well treated during Louis's life and protect her after his death. Should she give Louis a son, Mary would likely play an influential role in French affairs for some time, perhaps even by acting as regent during the dauphin's minority. In that event, she would need support from French nobles to navigate the factions at court. If Louis died without a son, Mary wanted leverage so that Henry would keep the secret bargain she had made with him: she would marry Louis in exchange for the freedom to choose her second husband. Ultimately, the more allies Mary made, the greater her ability to control her own fate.

Studying the records of Mary's brief tenure as queen of France, especially her letters, therefore gives new insight into how and why a woman might attempt to negotiate her agency in order to accomplish both political and personal ends. Moreover, Mary's example also teaches how a queen might seek

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7 Dewick, pp. 45, 48.
8 In addition to examples discussed below, Mary exercised her right to free prisoners while traveling to the capital for her coronation; see Green, p. 53.
to learn from other women. Whether through her familiarity with the works of Christine de Pizan, her observations of the experiences of other female royalty, especially Catherine of Aragon, or advice received from English mentors and French noblewomen, Mary understood that to wield power in France, she would need to draw on as many sources of authority as she could, whether through her rhetorical skill, reputation, status, or the influence that came from building a network of support through the economy of courtly favor.

Visiting the City: Mary's Familiarity with Christine de Pizan

When Catherine of Aragon came to England, her father-in-law Henry VII (1457–1509) invited her and her ladies to his library, where they found ‘many goodly pleasant books of works full delightful, sage, merry, and also right cunning, both in Latin and in English’.9 This detail is from The Receyt of the Ladie Kateryne, a work designed to record the magnificence of Catherine’s welcome to England. It suggests that Henry was proud of his library and that he thought reading an appropriate pastime for his daughter-in-law and her women. It is reasonable to conclude that he would have felt his library a similarly appropriate venue for his daughter, Mary, who was close to Catherine and traveled with her regularly.10

Through her father and grandmother’s libraries, Mary would have been immersed in French literary culture. Catalogues of Henry’s holdings show that the king’s library included a range of histories, classical and religious tomes, romances, and works by notable writers of the day, particularly French authors.11 Henry and Elizabeth of York (1466–1503) took pains to ensure their daughter was educated in French; when Mary was two years old, a ‘French maiden’ was engaged to converse with her, and in 1512 the humanist John Palsgrave (c. 1480–1554) was hired to give her formal tuition in the language.12 Palsgrave’s record of his teaching of Mary, Lesclaircissement de la langue francoyse, includes frequent quotations from a French translation of Ovid’s Heroides, as well as excerpts from popular French writers such as Jean Lemaire de Belges (1473–c. 1524), Alain Chartier (c. 1385–c. 1430), and Jean de Meun (1235/40–1305).13

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9 Kipling, 1990, p. 77 (I have modernized the spelling).
10 Sadlack, pp. 21–28.
12 Sadlack, p. 21.
13 Sadlack, pp. 30–36.
It is likely that Mary would have known Christine’s works in particular. Her father, Henry VII, certainly knew Christine’s writing; he had asked William Caxton (1415/24–1491/92) to print a translation of Christine’s Book of Deeds of Arms and Chivalry and there were two copies of the Epistle of Othea in his library. Mary could also have read the Othea in the library of her grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, who engaged in a small community of female readers. She exchanged books regularly with her mother-in-law, Anne Neville, Duchess of Buckingham (d. 1480), and sister-in-law, Anne Vere (1446–1472), who left Margaret her copy of the Othea in her will. Since Margaret was a noted patron of scholars who urged her granddaughter-in-law, Catherine of Aragon, to learn French, it is easy to imagine that she would have shared a work about women’s wisdom written by a famous Frenchwoman, given to her by a woman friend, with her granddaughter Mary.

As is perhaps fitting, Mary had connections to Christine’s work through her maternal heritage too. The Tudor royal libraries included a manuscript copy of the City of Ladies that probably belonged to Richard, Duke of York (1411–1460), Mary’s great-grandfather. Anthony Woodville (1442–1483), her great-uncle, owned the magnificently illuminated collection of Christine’s works, Harley 4431, and translated her Moral Proverbs. In 1521, Woodville’s nephew, the printer Henry Pepwell (d. 1539/40) would publish the translation by Bryan Anslay (d. 1536) of the City of Ladies, perhaps to attract the patronage of Catherine of Aragon, who was actively planning an education for her daughter that would prepare her to become queen after Henry VIII. Cristina Malcolmson observes that ‘such details make it probable that, among the older members of the Tudor and Woodville families, Christine was well known’. That certainly could have included Mary, the future French queen.

14 Malcolmson, p. 19.
15 Krug speculates the bequest stemmed from affection, family ties, and an assumption that Margaret would enjoy Othea (p. 78).
16 Dowling notes that Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth of York suggested Catherine learn French (p. 17).
17 Royal MS 19 A.xix; Malcolmson, p. 19.
18 Summit, p. 83.
19 Either Royal MS 19 A.xix or Harley 4431 was likely Ansley’s source (Long, p. 525). For Pepwell, see Malcolmson, p. 20.
20 Malcolmson, p. 19. Knowledge of Christine as author of the City may have started to fade, especially outside the court. Summit traces the gradual erasure of Christine as author from her works in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and notes that Ansley’s translation makes no mention of Christine de Pizan (pp. 61–108).
Mary may also have encountered the *City of Ladies* through her potential marriage to Charles of Castile. While preparing for the match, Mary wrote to his aunt and regent, Margaret of Austria (1480–1530), thanking her for some clothing patterns, noting that she was relieved the fashions suited her and that she was ‘greatly contented with them’.\(^\text{21}\) Partly a rhetorical move showcasing her willingness to be guided by Margaret of Austria, the letter also reveals that Mary was attuned to the fashions of the Burgundian court and anxious to be sure she was familiar with its culture.\(^\text{22}\) That likely included reading habits, and Margaret of Austria owned several works by Christine, including two copies of the *City of Ladies*, one purchased in 1511, by which time Mary had been betrothed to Margaret’s nephew for four years.\(^\text{23}\) Had Margaret mentioned the work, or had an ambassador alluded to its popularity, it would have been a natural choice for Mary to read the copy in her brother’s library in her efforts to remain *au courant*.

There is another strong connection between Mary, Margaret of Austria, and Christine de Pizan’s *City*. In 1513, as Henry VIII was closely allied with Margaret’s father, Maximilian, Margaret came to Tournai to celebrate Henry’s victory there. As part of the festivities, the city gave Margaret a six-panel set of tapestries illustrating scenes from the *City of Ladies*.\(^\text{24}\) While Henry was in Tournai, a city known for the quality of its tapestry production, he purchased a set of tapestries for Mary, the subject of which has not been recorded. Yet a catalogue of his tapestries made at his death in 1547 includes a six-panel set of *City of Ladies* tapestries among the items in ‘Lady Elizabeth[’s] Guarderobe’.\(^\text{25}\) In her quest to identify the *City of Ladies* tapestries that made their way into Henry’s possession, Susan Groag Bell speculates that perhaps Henry bought them for Mary as a wedding present, but concluded it was unlikely since such tapestries would have been passed to Mary’s daughter Frances (1517–1599) and thence to her granddaughter, Jane Grey (1537–1554), not Mary’s niece Elizabeth (1558–1603).\(^\text{26}\) However, if the tapestries Henry bought for Mary did depict the *City of Ladies*, it is entirely possible that they would have returned to Henry’s possession after Mary’s second (scandalous) marriage to Charles Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk (c. 1484–1545). Henry was so outraged at Mary’s secret wedding to the English duke that she ultimately wound up ceding to Henry a significant portion

\(^{21}\) Sadlack, Letter I, p. 164. ‘Je me contente moult fort deulx’.
\(^{22}\) Sadlack, pp. 45–46.
\(^{23}\) Bell, p. 87.
\(^{24}\) Bell, p. 42.
\(^{25}\) Bell, p. 2.
\(^{26}\) Bell, p. 141.
of her French dower income, as well as the gold plate and his choice of
the jewels she received from Louis during her time in France.\textsuperscript{27} The first
indenture Mary signed promised Henry 1000 pounds every six months
until she had repaid 24,000 pounds. She was consistently behind on the
payments and constantly begged Henry's forbearance, often sending gifts
with the requests. For instance, in 1516, Brandon wrote Henry asking for an
extension and inquiring when Mary might come to court; accompanying
the letter was a goshawk and several jewels. The final indenture signed in
1526 promised Henry any of the remaining jewels or plate from Louis upon
Mary's death. It is entirely possible that Mary gave Henry other goods, such
as a set of tapestries, against her debts.

Mary may well have seen other examples of the \textit{City of Ladies} tapestries in
France. Her predecessor, Louis's second wife, Anne de Bretagne (1477–1514),
owned another six-panel tapestry with a \textit{City of Ladies} theme, which she
brought to France upon her marriage to Louis.\textsuperscript{28} Anne's hangings remained in
France after her death, since a 1533 inventory of the French royal collection
includes them. It is plausible that they either adorned the rooms of the next
French queen, Mary, who arrived in France only nine months after Anne's
death, or that they were passed to Anne's daughter Claude (1499–1524),
the \textit{dauphin}'s wife. Bell also traces another eight-panel set of \textit{City of Ladies}
tapestries in the French court, likely belonging to Louise de Savoie, the
\textit{dauphin}'s mother.\textsuperscript{29}

The \textit{City of Ladies} remained a popular work among the French nobility.\textsuperscript{30}
For instance, Christine's Lady Reason influenced the works of Katherine
d'Amboise (c. 1481–1550), the wife of François I's chancellor, and of Gabrielle
de Bourbon (c. 1460–1516), daughter of the Count of Montpensier.\textsuperscript{31} Maureen
Curnow observes that copies 'were to be found in the royal library, as well
as in the libraries of the noblemen and noblewomen of the houses of Berry,
Burgundy, Orleans, Bourbon, and Savoy'.\textsuperscript{32} Given period practices of com-
munal reading, even if Mary missed reading the \textit{City} in England, it is highly
likely she would have encountered it in France.

Another of Christine's works that remained influential was \textit{The Book of
Three Virtues}. The patron for the first three printed French editions of the

\textsuperscript{27} Sadlack, pp. 114–15, 120–22.
\textsuperscript{28} Bell, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{29} Bell, pp. 113–14.
\textsuperscript{30} Long, p. 526.
\textsuperscript{31} Broomhall, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{32} Curnow, p. 118.
work was Anne de Bretagne. Manuscript copies belonged to Margaret of Austria, her niece Mary of Hungary (1457–1482), Louise de Savoie, Diane de Poitiers (1499–1566), and Anne de France (c. 1460–1522), who drew upon Christine’s wisdom in writing a book of advice for her daughter, Suzanne (1491–1521). Anne, who had served as regent of France during the minority of her brother Charles VIII (1470–1498), also oversaw the education of many of the next generation of noblewomen, including Margaret of Austria and Louise de Savoie. So trusted was Anne that Louis turned to her to guide his new English bride in the ‘modes and fashions of France’. Whether Anne gave Mary the Book of Three Virtues to read is unknown, but certainly lessons from Christine’s book would have been employed as part of Mary’s instruction. If Mary did read all three works, Othea, City of Ladies, and Three Virtues, she would have derived an understanding of various models of queenship, a respect for the influence women could wield, especially at court, and yet a keen awareness of the difficulties she might face as Louis’s queen. Amid dozens of stories about wives in the City of Ladies, Christine includes the tale of Antonia, whose ‘advice, intelligence, and bravery’ twice enabled her husband Belisarius to survive the machinations of court politics and earned him the favor of the emperor Justinian. Christine frequently illustrates how a woman might use her influence on a loved one to bring about desired ends, such as Veturia persuading her son Coriolanus to spare Rome or Clotilda convincing Clovis to convert to Christianity. The men who ignore women’s advice do so at their peril; Hector’s failure to heed Andromache’s warning leads to the destruction of Troy, as Christine emphasizes in both the City and the Othea. In none of these particular stories do women possess absolute rule, yet each of them wields enormous influence on family, influence that in turn affects the whole country.

Nor were the women in Christine’s works all taken from history or classical mythology; in the dialogues with Ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, Christine emphasizes that she knows women who illustrate the lessons the

33 Pizan, 1989b, p. 43.
34 Willard, p. 59.
35 Willard, p. 62.
36 ‘modes et façons de France’, Pradel, p. 197.
39 Hindman observes that the heart of Christine’s political allegory in Othea — her plea that the leaders of France listen to her and make peace — rests on her portrayal of Andromache and Hector (pp. 55–60).
allegorical figures teach her. For instance, in a subject that Mary would find most relevant, Christine addresses the subject of young wives of much older men. Lady Rectitude tells stories of Julia, wife of Pompey, Tertia Aemilia, wife of Scipio Africanus, Xanthippe, wife of Socrates, and Pompeia Paulina, wife of Seneca.\(^40\) The Christine-narrator responds with her own story of Jeanne de Laval, wife of Constable Bertrand de Guesclin: ‘although he had a very ugly body and was old, while she was in the flower of her youth, she paid more attention to the worthiness of his virtues rather than to the manner of his person and loved him with such devotion that she mourned his death for the rest of her life’.\(^41\) In the process, Christine encourages her readers to understand the City of Ladies as an exemplar, effectively creating a conduct book for ladies before writing Three Virtues, one that encourages readers to see themselves within the broader context of women’s herstory. For a queen in Mary’s position, reading about such women would confirm the enormity of the task ahead.

**Reading Christine: Mary’s Literary Lessons**

One of the most troubling stories in the City of Ladies is that of the Sabine women, who were abducted and forcibly married by Romulus and the Romans. After a five-year war between the Romans and Sabines, the Sabine queen calls her ladies together to say that they can only lose in this conflict: the death of husbands, fathers, or brothers. Therefore she leads the women and their children onto the battlefield between the warring armies and begs them to make peace. These actions move both groups to pity as the Romans miraculously transform into loving sons-in-law who honor their fathers.\(^42\) Christine is clear that the remarkable courage of the Sabine ladies ‘forced’ the men to make peace; however, that peace required their disturbing self-sacrifice, remaining married to their rapists.\(^43\) Throughout her works, Christine consistently places the onus of domestic harmony on the wife; for instance, in Three Virtues, Lady Prudence’s first precept for a princess desiring honor is that she ‘must love her husband and live with him in peace.

\(^41\) Pizan, 1998, p.131; ‘nonobstant fust il tres lait de corps et viel, celle noble dame estant en la fleur de sa jeunesse, qui plus regarda au grant pris de ses vertus que a la façon de la personne, l’ama de tres grant amour tant qu’elle a plainte toute sa vie la mort de luy’, Pizan, 1975, p. 839.
Otherwise she has already encountered the torments of Hell, where storms rage perpetually’.\textsuperscript{44} Such works give insight into the pressures medieval society placed on women to subjugate themselves for patriarchal needs.

That pressure remained steady in the sixteenth century; Mary knew well that she was expected to sacrifice her own desires on the marriage altar to make peace. After Louis’s death, she reminded Henry, ‘your grace knoweth well that I did marry for your pleasure at this time’.\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, this behavior was required of women. Naomi Miller and Naomi Yavneh note that sisters ‘were often constructed as their brothers’ “treasures”, both because they could be married off and because they look out for their brothers’ interests, monetarily, socially, or even emotionally’.\textsuperscript{46} Yet Mary possessed a weapon in the rhetoric that obliged Henry to protect his sister to maintain his reputation as a good chivalric king. Therefore, she agreed to marry Louis to establish the ‘great weal of peace which should ensue of the same, though I understood that [Louis] was very aged and sickly, yet for the helping forth of good peace, I was contented’; however, she added a clause to the deal: ‘if I should fortune to overlive the said late king, I might with your good will freely choose and dispose myself to any other marriage at my liberty’.\textsuperscript{47} With Henry’s consent, Mary prepared for marriage, accepting the burdens of a much older husband in ill health, the factions of the French court, and the duty of creating bridges between England and France in exchange for a tenuous grasp at personal agency later.

After a proxy wedding, Mary’s first action was to establish an epistolary relationship with her new husband. Her letters project the image of the virtuous wife Christine outlines: loving, obedient, and eager to please. Each of the three letters that survive opens with professions of humility and love: ‘very humbly I recommend myself unto your good grace’.\textsuperscript{48} Thanking him for the affectionate letters he has sent, Mary assures Louis that:

\begin{quotation}
the thing I most desire and wish for today is to hear good news of you, your health and prosperity [...]. It will please you moreover, my lord, to send for me and command your good and agreeable pleasures in order for
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{44} Pizan, 1989b, p. 98; ‘il apertient que elle aime son mary et vive en paix avec lui, ou autrement elle a ja trouvéz les tourmens d’enfer, ou n’a fors toute tempeste’, Pizan, 1989a, p. 52. Rouillard notes that Christine gives no such precepts to men (pp. 162–63).
\textsuperscript{45} Sadlack, Letter 14, p. 174.
\textsuperscript{46} Miller and Yavneh, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{47} Sadlack, Letter 23, p. 182.
\textsuperscript{48} Sadlack, Letters 2, 3, and 4, pp. 164–66. ‘bien humblement a votre bonne grace je me recommande’. 
me to obey and please you in this by the help of God, who keep you, my lord, in good life and long, by the hand of your very humble wife, Mary.  

Christine might have used such a letter as an exemplar. Since letters in the sixteenth century were routinely often read aloud and shared with others, regardless of personal feelings, Mary needed to craft a specific rhetorical picture for Louis and the French court. To this end she emphasizes that she writes with her own hand, which would have been seen as a sign of her investment in the marriage. It also made the letter a more tangible connection between the sender and recipient. For his part, Louis responded positively to Mary’s overtures and wrote enthusiastically to Henry’s adviser, Archbishop Thomas Wolsey (1471–1530), about his delight in Mary and commitment to the Anglo-French alliance.

The marriage proceeded smoothly initially; chroniclers recorded the charm and beauty of the new queen, one of them even remarking on Mary’s love for the king, while English ambassadors reported how dutifully Mary cared for Louis when he fell ill and how generously Louis responded with extravagant praise and jewels. However, in the midst of the apparent harmony, Louis abruptly dismissed most of Mary’s retinue, including her adviser Lady Jane Guildford (c. 1463–1538), causing a flurry in both courts. Mary wrote letters of protest to Henry and Wolsey. Given that Louis had approved the list of Mary’s proposed attendants, his actions seem sudden and inexplicable. For her part, Mary’s anxious rhetoric seems overly dramatic. Yet examining the incident through the lens of Christine’s *Three Virtues* gives new insight into the situation and Mary’s forceful response.

49 Sadlack, Letter 3, pp. 165–66. ‘la chose que plus je desire & souhaite pour le jourdhuy sest dentendre de voz bonnes nouvelles, sante et bonne prosperite [ ... ] il plaira au surplies Monsieur me mander et comandez voz bons & agreables plaisirs pour vous obeir et complaire par laide de Dieu qui Monsieur vous doint bon vie et longue. De la main de votre bien humble compagne Marie’.

50 Sadlack, pp. 3–8.

51 Literary depictions of letter-writing urge writers to embed themselves in the letter — ideally by weeping on it, see Sadlack, pp. 60–61.

52 September 1514. Rymer, p. 81.

53 Jean de Treul wrote of Mary: ‘et est une aussi belle dame que jamais dame natur créa; et l’ayme tant le Roy’ (in Garnier, p. 263). For the ambassadors, see Worcester and West’s letter (Ellis, pp. 239–43).

54 For list, see British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius C.XI, fol. 155r. For Louis’s care regarding attendants, see Worcester’s letter to Henry explaining that Louis had forbidden Jane Popincourt, Mary’s French companion from childhood, when he discovered that Popincourt had become Longueville’s mistress (Ellis, p. 236).
After outlining the virtuous behavior of a queen in *Three Virtues*, Christine describes in detail the ideal governess to care for the young royal after her marriage. Such a woman will be wise, prudent, and loving, maintaining a balance of gentle instruction and companionship with cautious guardianship.55 She will foster a good relationship between the lady and her husband, guiding the lady's affections towards him. In particular, Christine warns, she will protect her princess from gossip, court machinations, or any attempts to sully her virtue. Therefore, the governess-adviser will observe her lady's behavior at all times, as well as those who surround her, and act quickly to neutralize any threats; 'she will keep such close watch that nobody will have the opportunity to speak to her mistress alone'.56 Yet Christine's wisdom irritated Louis. The English ambassador Charles Somerset, Earl of Worcester (c. 1460–1526), wrote to Wolsey that Louis complained that Guildford 'began to take upon her not only to rule the Queen, but also that [Mary] should not come to him but [Guildford] should be with her; nor that no Lady nor Lord should speak with her but she should hear it'.57 By operating under Christine's model of counsel, Guildford must have seemed overly interfering to a king largely preoccupied with securing an heir and being entertained by his young bride.

For her part, Mary wrote anxiously but cautiously to Henry and Wolsey about Guildford's dismissal. Her letters were lengthy, indicating the extent of her distress. She writes to Henry that the only women left to her are maidens 'such as never had experience nor knowledge how to advertise or give me counsel in any time of need, which is to be feared more shortly than your grace thought at the time of my departing'.58 Mary appeals to Henry's self-interest, arguing that she requires advice that will be to Henry's 'pleasure' and her own 'profit'. To Wolsey, Mary warily makes similar plaints, observing that she anticipates needing Guildford's counsel soon but will let Guildford relate the details. Both letters close with a postscript asking Henry and Wolsey 'to give credence to my mother Guildford'.59 In this fashion, Mary endorses the truth of Guildford's speech while remaining discreet about any problems in the French court. Given how public a letter might be, this prudent diplomacy accords with Christine's warnings about the consequences of injudicious speech; a queen 'must be mistress of her tongue, for if she should say any equivocal word behind [her enemies'] backs

57 6 November 1514. Ellis, p. 244 (I have modernized the spelling).
59 Sadlack, Letter 6, p. 168.
which could be repeated back to them, it would indeed be very dangerous’. Mary weighs carefully what she commits to writing.

It is difficult therefore to ascertain exactly what situation troubled Mary so greatly, but logically, it would have concerned her relationship with the dauphin, François, his wife and Mary’s new step-daughter, Claude, and his mother, Louise. The French court gossiped that François was overly attracted to his new stepmother-in-law, while his mother was so threatened by the prospect of an heir that she ordered Claude to watch Mary during the day and a lady-in-waiting to do so at night. On 22 September, Louise wrote scornfully of the aged king, that he was ‘exceedingly old and weak’, going to meet his ‘young wife’, and then anxiously recorded on 9 October that the king and Mary had wed and gone to bed together. Others mocked the disparity in Mary and Louis’s age; law clerks sniped that Henry had sent Louis a ‘hackney’ — vulgarly signifying ‘prostitute’ — to ‘carry him swiftly and more gently to hell or heaven’. The opposition and gossip must have helped Louis realise that Mary needed some French allies, since he sent for his cousin, Anne de France, one-time regent of France (and reader of Christine’s works), to give Mary advice. Pierre Pradel speculates that Louis even anticipated a possible regency for Anne again should he have a son with Mary but die, leaving an infant dauphin.

While Louis would die without siring a son, there can be no doubt that Mary knew the king was hoping for the birth of an heir and, furthermore, the challenges that a widowed queen with a young child might face. Christine supplies many examples in the City of Ladies, including the French queens Frideswide, who protected her son against ambitious barons, and Blanche, who ruled so well in her son’s minority that she remained head of his Council ever after. She also mentions Zenobia, who fought wars beside her husband and defied his jealous relatives to keep the throne for her children after the king’s murder. She ruled well, Christine notes, partly by ruling wisely, but also by ensuring peace through her generous gifts and surrounding herself

60 Pizan, 1989b, p. 106; ‘elle soit maistresse de sa bouche, car se aucun mot disoit d’eulx en derriere contraire a ses semblans qui fust raporté [ce seroit peril]', Pizan, 1989a, p. 64.
61 Brantôme reports that Louise had to caution her son not to disinherit himself (p. 640). After Louis’s death Mary complained to Henry of ‘the extreme pain and annoyance I was in by reason of such suit as the king made unto me not according with my honour’, Sadlack, Letter 15, p. 175. For Louise, see Fleuranges, p. 44.
62 ‘fort antique et débile’; ‘sa jeune fille’, Savoie, p. 89.
63 ‘une hacquenée pour le porter bientost et plus doucement en enfer ou en paradis’, Fleuranges, p. 45.
64 Pradel, p. 197.
with virtuous and chivalrous retainers.\textsuperscript{66} Christine also addresses such issues in \textit{Three Virtues}; her second and fourth teachings — how a princess should treat the king’s relatives and deal with enemies at court — both have great resonance for Mary’s situation. In the second rule, Christine advises a princess to treat her new family kindly, making every effort to praise them (even if they do not deserve such magnanimity), and to ensure peace between them.\textsuperscript{67} Her fourth rule is more startling; Christine counsels the princess to deceive her enemies by acting warmly towards them.\textsuperscript{68} While a wise princess will anticipate the difficulty of hiding her feelings, pretending disingenuousness in the face of attack, and remaining constantly vigilant, she may be confident that such dissimulation is virtuous because it preserves the kingdom’s peace. Moreover, her friendliness may eventually win them as allies; at worst, the kind reputation she develops will defend her against any detractors’ lies.\textsuperscript{69}

Whether she read Christine directly or had Christine’s wisdom transmitted through Anne de France, Mary seems to have attended to such advice and to have worked to charm everyone she met. Merchants meeting her in London after her marriage report that Mary made a point of speaking some words to them in French.\textsuperscript{70} Like Zenobia, she bestowed gifts; for instance, at a banquet which Mary attended with the \textit{dauphin} and his wife, Claude, she was given boxes of expensive spices, and chroniclers noted that she graciously ordered six boxes be sent to her step-daughter Renée (1510–1574), Claude’s sister, at Vincennes.\textsuperscript{71} Her efforts were noticed; the chronicler at Abbeville described her as ‘beautiful, honest, and joyous, and takes pleasure in all entertainments [...]. I think that this will be a lady of boldness, because she is not afraid of anything, and here rules wisely her people as one could wish to have’.\textsuperscript{72} The connection the chronicler makes between Mary’s behavior and his prediction that she will rule well, suggests the wisdom of Christine’s advice. Through her enthusiasm and warmth, Mary was winning allies wherever she could.

\textsuperscript{66} Pizan, 1998, pp. 53–55; Pizan, 1975, pp. 701–06.
\textsuperscript{67} Pizan, 1989b, p. 101; Pizan, 1989a, pp. 57–58.
\textsuperscript{68} Denery observes that Christine challenges theologians such as Augustine who maintained lying was always a sin.
\textsuperscript{69} Pizan, 1989b, pp. 102–07; Pizan, 1989a, pp. 62–65.
\textsuperscript{70} Sanudo, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{71} Bonnardot, p. 219.
\textsuperscript{72} ‘La dicte dame est tres belle honnest & joyeuse & est pour prendre Plaisir en tous esbatemens. [...] Je croy que se sera une damedaudasse, car elle ne seffraye de rien, & cy commande sagement a ses gens se quelle vault avoir’, Cocheris, p. 7.
Mary also took pains to ensure her alliances at home with England remained strong. She wrote frequently to Henry; if she did not have a particular favor to ask, she expressed her love and gratitude for his letters and counsel, thus maintaining the epistolary and emotional connection. She also praised the ambassadors who had worked on her behalf; by offering them public recognition, she rewarded them with the implicit suggestion that they were worthy of Henry’s continued favor. At the same time, she deepened her relationship with Wolsey. Throughout her stay in France, the only person besides Henry from whom she asks patronage for her servants is Wolsey. During the Guildford affair, she suggests that she prefers Wolsey to a rival, Thomas Howard (1473–1554), the Duke of Norfolk. Where her letter to Henry simply expresses dismay that Norfolk so easily acceded to Louis's wishes, to Wolsey she condemns the Duke's behavior, saying that 'he has neither dealt best with me nor yet with [Guildford] at this time' and wishes for Wolsey’s presence in Norfolk’s stead. Here Mary clearly, yet delicately, aligns herself with Wolsey in the factions of the English court. The two were starting to establish a partnership of mutual benefit that would only deepen after Mary secretly wedded Charles Brandon after Louis's death. Wolsey mediated between the couple and a wrathful Henry.

Mary understood well the courtly economy and how the exchange of favors increased her status, and enhanced her authority and security. Before she left for France, Louis d’Orléans, the Duke of Longueville (1480–1516), asked her to intercede with Henry on behalf of a merchant named Jehan Cavalcanty in return for any service that might please her. This accords with Christine’s fifth teaching in *Three Virtues*: a princess should cultivate the favor of clerics, nobles, lawyers, knights, and the people, whose reverence will provide protection. When Mary arrived in France, she almost immediately started accumulating socio-political capital. Only nine days after her wedding, she wrote to Henry asking him to arrange a low ransom for François Descars, a Frenchman captured at Thérouanne who was a friend of both the dauphin and Longueville. She explicitly tells Henry that ‘I would that my lord the king and the two dukes to whom I am much bound should think he should be the more favoured for my sake’. Such rhetoric illustrates Mary’s awareness of the economy of influence, and her desire

75 Sadlack, Letter 6, p. 168.
76 Longueville.
to establish herself as a power worth courting. On another occasion, Mary would practice public piety by writing to Henry on behalf of the priest Vincent Knight, who was captured at Tournai and held in England for nearly a year. Calling on familial ties, she reminds Henry that Knight had done great service for their father, then asks that he be released and recompensed for his losses, receiving in exchange only the prayers he would offer for them both.\(^{79}\) Mary also took care to preserve her ties back in England, remaining active on behalf of the retainers released from her service by seeking Henry and Wolsey’s patronage for them.\(^{80}\) In each instance, she acts as Christine says a great lady should, cultivating the good will of her people. Each savvy rhetorical move was designed to enhance her reputation as a virtuous and gracious ruler and to increase her influence by demonstrating the depth of her connection to Henry.

Because a princess should particularly court the king’s advisers, writes Christine, ‘from time to time she will have them come before her, receive them honorably, speak to them eloquently, and make an effort to like them as much as possible’.\(^{81}\) Taking such advice to heart, Mary used flattery to create allies at the French court. For instance, Brandon wrote to Wolsey that Mary told him and the other English ambassador ‘diverse things the which we will show you at our coming whereby we perceive that she had need of some good friends about the king’.\(^{82}\) Therefore, they arranged a meeting with Mary and some of the king’s advisers, including Longueville, already an ally of Mary’s, together with the treasurer Florimond Robertet (1459–1527) and the receiver-general of Normandy, Sir Thomas Bohier (1460–1524). There, Brandon explained to them that Mary asked:

on her behalf and in the name of the king our master that they would be good and loving to her and that they would give her counsel from time to time how she might best order herself to content the king whereof she was most desirous and in her should lack no good will. And because she knew well they were the men that the king loved and trusted and knew best his mind therefore she was utterly determined to love them and trust them and to be ordered by their counsel.\(^{83}\)

79 Sadlack, Letter 11, p. 171.
81 Pizan, 1989b, p. 109; ‘ordonnera que ilz viennent vers elle aucunes fois, les recevra honnourablement, parlera a eulx par sages paroles, et le plus qu'elle pourra les tendra en amour’, Pizan, 1989a, p. 68.
82 Brandon.
83 Brandon.
The speech follows Christine’s proscriptions precisely; it is a blend of flattery, humility, and gentleness calculated to demonstrate her loyalty to Louis and win his advisers’ favor. According to Brandon, it worked; moved by her plea, the men promised to report her ‘honorable and loving request’ to the king. In this fashion, Mary would gain the benefit of their wisdom in navigating court politics, and their protection against any machinations, which, as Christine notes, meant that people would praise her shrewdness.84 By enlisting both English and French advisers to help in this fashion, Mary demonstrates her political acuity and creates a formidable defence against any difficulty with the dauphin or his family. While history shows that Mary was not destined to remain in France much longer, she was nonetheless establishing a foundation for power in the event that Louis’s continued life meant her longer rule, or even, should they produce a son, a regency in France.

Louis died on New Year’s Day, 1515; the Anglo-French marital alliance, which lasted less than five months altogether, was over. Mary was not pregnant with Louis’s son, so a new king, François I, was crowned. Meanwhile, hearing rumors that Henry sought another alliance, Mary seized the initiative and told Charles Brandon that he had four days to marry her or else give up the idea forever. The couple wed in secret and continued to negotiate the terms of Mary’s return to England; when fears of a false pregnancy led them to confess, Mary took full responsibility for the match and used a combination of rhetorical wiles and promises of money to win Henry’s forgiveness.85 The move ensured that she would remain ‘Mary the French queen’ and, as dowager queen, serve the rest of her life as both a conduit for favors and a symbol of amity between the two courts.

Although brief, Mary’s tenure as queen of France nonetheless reveals the continuing influence of Christine de Pizan’s works on the noblewomen of Europe. Moreover, it serves as a case study illustrating the practicality of Christine’s advice and how well it applied to the machinations of real court politics whether the stakes were personal or political. Christine’s writing was a primer for women in positions of authority, emphasizing that status and influence were conduits to power that a woman could wield just as effectively as men. Through her sage logic and copious examples of literary, historical, and biblical queens, Christine demonstrated how vital it was for a princess to establish a network of allies at court and how potent was the rhetorical power of the reputation of a virtuous and loving queen. Christine’s works also taught the dangers a woman might face and the limitations of queenly

84 Pizan, 1989b, p. 109; Pizan, 1989a, p. 68.
85 Sadlack, pp. 91–117.
power, particularly with regard to the ways that a woman’s relationship with her husband and kin would generally determine how much agency she possessed over her own life and the extent of her ability to accomplish any political goal she might have.

Examining Mary’s life reveals how a sixteenth-century princess might become familiar with Christine de Pizan’s works, whether through their enduring popularity at the English and French courts, tapestries or other visual depictions, or female mentors who could have shared Christine’s works to supplement her education. Mary’s letters also demonstrate the impact of such reading on her political choices, how she used the literary lessons Christine provided to develop strategies to strengthen her relationship with Louis and position at court, and by extension, to foster a genuine alliance between England and France. Studying the ways Mary worked to gain influence as a foreign princess in the French court thus adds new insight into the avenues of power open to such an ambassador-queen.

Works cited


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**Erin A. Sadlack** is Associate Professor of English in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Her book on Mary Tudor, the French queen, and women’s letter-writing, titled *The French Queen’s Letters: Mary Tudor Brandon and the Politics of Marriage in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2011 as part of its Queenship and Power series. She is currently editing *Romeo and Juliet* for the Internet Shakespeare Editions and working on her next project, a study of Elizabethan petition letters.