



Review

Orlanda S.H. Lie, Martine Meuwese, Mark Aussems, and Hermina Joldersma, *Christine de Pizan in Bruges: ‘Le Livre de la Cité des Dames’ as ‘Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen’ (London, British Library, Add. 20698) (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015)*

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In recent decades Christine de Pizan’s *Cité des Dames* has been extensively studied worldwide, from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, and translated into at least seven languages.¹ Its first translation – commissioned in 1475 by Jan III de Baenst, the former mayor of Bruges – was into Middle Dutch, and survives in a single manuscript. It is on that codex, rather than the translation itself, that this interdisciplinary study focuses.² The authors begin by claiming that MS Add. 20698 is ‘a fascinatingly multi-layered response’ (7) to Christine’s work; their contention is amply borne out in what follows.

A substantial opening chapter, ‘The Codex in Context’ (9-48), addresses the various contexts and agents that shaped the manuscript of *Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen* (hereafter *Stede*). Brief overviews of Christine’s career and the urban environment of Bruges are followed by an account of De Baenst’s role in the city’s cultural landscape, and more specifically as a patron and bibliophile. The manuscript’s production is then described, with particular attention paid to the work of the miniaturists – including such renowned figures as the Master of the Dresden Prayer Book and the Master of Margaret of York (36-40) – who contributed to its rich but unfinished illustrative programme. Comparisons are drawn with various manuscripts of the *Cité des Dames*, and with contemporary manuscripts from Bruges. Finally, the translator’s epilogue and its ideological stance are considered. The second and third chapters support and document the analysis provided in the first. Chapter 2 (49-91) brings together high-quality colour reproductions of the manuscript’s 25 complete and 16 partly executed miniatures (space had been provided for a total of 133 illustrations, one for almost every chapter). Chapter 3 (93-109) supplies a bilingual Middle Dutch-English edition of the translator’s epilogue, usefully accompanied by facing-page reproductions of the relevant manuscript pages. Two appendices provide a detailed description of MS Add. 20698 (110-18), and a list of the partly or wholly executed miniatures (119).

The book has evidently been produced with an academic but non-specialist audience in mind. Its descriptions of Christine’s career (10), of Bruges under Burgundian sovereignty (11), and of manuscript production processes (22) are pitched at a level that presupposes little if any pre-

¹ See Laurent Brun, ed., ‘Christine de Pizan’, in *Archives de littérature du Moyen Âge* <https://www.arlima.net/ad/christine_de_pizan.html#cit> [accessed 20 June 2018].

² A diplomatic transcription of the translation is available online: Miriam Oort and E. M. Versélewel de Witt Hamer, *De stede der vrouwen: Een diplomatische transcriptie van de Middelnederlandse vertaling (1475) van Christine de Pizans ‘Livre de la cité des dames’ (1405)*, in *Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren* <http://dbnl.org/tekst/pisao01nver01_01/index.php> [accessed 20 June 2018].

existing knowledge. Not that this level is wholly consistent: the term ‘rhetoricians’ (17) is explained but ‘quire’ (22) is not, and Appendix 1 is resolutely technical in its content and terminology. In general, however, the study is accessible to a wide international community of medievalists, including historians, literary specialists, and art historians; users need not be familiar with the culture of the late medieval Low Countries. In particular, it could provide graduate students with excellent examples of text-image research and of codicological analysis. It is hardly surprising to learn that the authors’ collaboration arose out of teaching experiences (7). The bibliography is extensive and up to date, while illustration is generous (not only in Chapter 2) and effectively integrated to the discursive analysis.

The first chapter demonstrates that the manuscript must have been copied from a Middle Dutch exemplar, probably not long after the work of translation was completed (22), and argues persuasively that De Baenst commissioned both the translation and the manuscript itself (25-26). Copying was apparently conceived as ‘a continuous workflow’ (22); three different scribes can be identified, on the basis of distinctive habits noted in Appendix 1. Most of the partly or wholly executed miniatures appear early in the manuscript (26). By contrast, border decoration is more fully achieved, suggesting that different artists were responsible for different features of the illumination (27). Several instructions to miniaturists are partly conserved in the margins, implying that the illustrations were conceived specifically for this codex rather than being copied from an exemplar (26-27). Significantly, the instructions are in French, indicating that this must have been the preferred language of the miniaturists. The authors plausibly suggest that the programme of illustrations was probably not completed because funds simply ran out: De Baenst was imprisoned and fined in early 1477, by which time the production process had been under way for not much more than a year (40-41).

Christine’s authorial persona figures relatively frequently in the illustrations (28-29), though most of the extant and planned images are devoted to the exemplary women commemorated in the *Stede*. The authors provide a largely descriptive account of these (29-31), while various details of interest in specific miniatures, including occasional text-image discrepancies. Perhaps significantly, as far as the available evidence allows us to conclude, the illustrations in MS Add. 20698 are less apt than those in manuscripts of the *Cité* to foreground the victimhood of Christine’s heroines (31). More generally, the *Stede* manuscript proves to ‘exceed French models’ (31) in the fullness of its illustrative programme. The authors suggest that this may reflect ‘social rivalry’ (31) among local elites – a tendency that they neatly describe elsewhere as ‘the phenomenon of bibliophilic envy’ (11). Their interpretation is entirely reasonable, though it is also worth considering that the rivalry may be aesthetic as well as purely material.³ Although no particularly close parallels can be adduced, the authors also rightly note the possible role played by illustrated manuscripts of Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, especially in its French version, as models for the *Stede* manuscript’s miniaturists (34-35).

The translator’s epilogue is characterized as a dissident voice, which undercuts Christine’s claims to authority and thereby mitigates the value ascribed to the *Stede* (41-46). This is

³ Aesthetic rivalry, in the form of competition between poets, is apparent in many of the Dutch translations of French verse produced in the region. The translations tend to adopt more elaborate verse forms than their sources: see Adrian Armstrong, “‘Half dicht, half prose gheordineert’: vers et prose de moyen français en moyen néerlandais”, in *Le Moyen Français*, 76-77 (2015), 7-38. The illustrations planned for the *Stede* manuscript attest to an analogous process: here a translation outdoes its source in respect not of formal sophistication, but of visual and material richness.

particularly clear in the second of the epilogue's two chapters: there is some astute analysis of the translator's disparaging comments on Christine, and of the condescending way in which he mansplains – not always accurately – the theological tradition of the 'privileges of women'. Less convincing is the authors' claim that the epilogue is preoccupied with an intended audience of 'fallen women' (42). Both terms in this expression call for some qualification. In respect of 'women', it is not unusual for vernacular didactic authors of this period to interpellate a primarily female audience when they translate or adapt material from another language. The principle at work is that the material is particularly useful for women, since they have less formal education than men and could not therefore be expected to access the original sources.⁴ As for 'fallen', it is a very common strategy for profeminine authors to make the obvious point that some women are virtuous and others are not, and indeed to quote relevant misogynistic commonplaces, in order to forestall possible criticism from readers steeped in patriarchal assumptions. The *Stede* translator's epilogue must surely be read as an example of this strategy; it certainly makes no claim that the intended audience *specifically* comprises 'fallen' women. In their conclusion to Chapter 1, the authors reflect on the ideological tensions between the manuscript's illustrative programme and the translator's rather less profeminine epilogue (47), and suggest that they may reflect social distinctions between the translator's clerical milieu and his patron's aristocratic environment. This is certainly possible, though there is no hard evidence that the translator was a cleric, rather than someone who had simply had a solid Latin education.⁵ Nevertheless, the authors' attentiveness to the potential for conflicting perspectives within the processes of book production and reception – and to the ways in which physical environment and social class can complicate pre-modern discourses of gender – is richly suggestive, and a valuable example for researchers.

Chapter 1 also raises, in passing, some intriguing issues that future researchers might address more fully. One of these is the presence of different vernaculars in libraries of the late medieval Low Countries. De Baenst owned books in French, Dutch, and Latin (13-14, 21), exemplifying a tendency that literary and cultural historians have often underestimated or sought to explain away. Another is the possibility that the *Stede* might eventually be connected to a determinate point in the complex textual tradition of the *Cité* (22, n. 39). Indeed, specialists in Christine's French writings will gain a great deal from this book: it enriches understanding of the *Cité*'s material reception and manuscript tradition, most previous research on which has been devoted to a relatively small number of 'classic' witnesses such as the so-called Queen's Manuscript (London, British Library, MS Harley 4431).

By combining textual, material, and ideological perspectives on the *Stede* manuscript, the authors have produced a sophisticated and stimulating analysis. The book stands as an object lesson in the value of collaborative research; it deserves to encourage more collaborations of this kind.

⁴ Jean Bouchet, a French didactic writer active throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, often underlines his works' potential value for female readers in this way.

⁵ Schools in fifteenth-century Bruges were certainly in a position to turn out suitably qualified figures. See, for instance, R. R. Post, *Scholen en onderwijs in Nederland gedurende de middeleeuwen* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1954), pp. 139-52; A. Dewitte, 'Scholen en onderwijs te Brugge gedurende de middeleeuwen', in *Handelingen van het Genootschap voor Geschiedenis*, 109 (1972), 145-217.