

Christine de Pizan in Bruges

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Le Livre de la Cité des Dames

as

Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen

(London, British Library, Add. 20698)

ORLANDA S.H. LIE
MARTINE MEUWESE
MARK AUSSEMS
HERMINA JOLDERSMA



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CONTENTS

Preface	7
1 THE CODEX IN CONTEXT	9
Introduction	10
Bruges around 1475	11
Jan III de Baenst	12
<i>Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen</i>	20
From Translation to Codex	21
The Illumination: Methods of Work	26
The Illustration Programme	28
A Picture Gallery of Exemplary Women	29
The Role of Models	31
The Illuminators	36
The Translator and His Epilogue	41
Conclusion	47
2 THE ILLUSTRATIONS FROM <i>HET BOUC VAN DE STEDE DER VRAUWEN</i>	49
3 BILINGUAL EDITION OF THE EPILOGUE	93
APPENDICES	
Appendix 1: Codicological Description of the Codex	110
Appendix 2: List of Miniatures	119
Bibliography	120
Dutch Summary	124
French Summary / Résumé	126
About the Authors	128

PREFACE

The very first translation of Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*, completed in Bruges in 1475 and pre-dating the next translation of that work (in English) by about fifty years, is a fascinatingly multi-layered response to a text that was, and still is, acknowledged as a major work. While the Middle Dutch translation is quite faithful to the original, the (only) manuscript in which that translation was transmitted, with a stunningly ambitious illumination programme and an opinionated translator's epilogue, constitutes an important chapter in understanding how Christine's work was received by a culture and a social milieu very different from her own. The relative obscurity in which this document has languished is undeserved. It gives us tremendous pleasure to tell the story of this manuscript and its most important features.

What began as source material for a course on medieval literature turned out to be a fruitful subject not only for interdisciplinary teaching, but also for interdisciplinary scholarship. First work on the Middle Dutch translation of *Cité des Dames* was done in the seminar 'Christine de Pizan' (Theme Cycle Medieval Studies at Utrecht University, 1999). Guided by Orlanda Lie and Frank Brandsma, students completed a first anthology of *Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen* (Brandsma, Delen and Lie, 1999). With the help of Noor Versélewel de Witt Hamer and the friendly cooperation of Miriam Oort, the entire Middle Dutch translation was made accessible in a digital diplomatic transcription: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/pisa001nver01_01/index.htm.

Already then it became clear that this manuscript contained so many varied aspects that it called for an interdisciplinary approach. The team began with Orlanda Lie (Medieval Studies and Medieval Dutch literature) and Hermina Joldersma (Literary History and Women's Studies, in Utrecht as Belle van Zuylen Visiting Professor); it was expanded with Martine Meuwese (Medieval Art) and Mark Aussems (Codicology and Palaeography). As with most interdisciplinary work, this book has been a long time in the making, but the results make it all worthwhile. Looking at the material from different angles generated new questions, and combining our specialist knowledge has sharpened our perspectives and opened up new vistas.

We are pleased to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to those who have helped us in many ways. We are indebted to Willem Kuiper for his thought-provoking remarks and for generously sharing his vast knowledge of Middle Dutch philology. René Stuij took the time to read and comment on the final draft of our book, and assisted with the French Summary. We thank our Bruges connections: Ludo Vandamme (Bibliothecaris Openbare Bibliotheek Brugge), Noël Geirnaert (Hoofdarchivaris, Stadsarchief Brugge) and Bie Callens (Directeur Welzijn, CM Brugge) for their interest in our project. The

friendly services of Sandra Powlette (Picture Library Manager, British Library) and Ann Kelders (Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels) are warmly appreciated. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of M.A.O.C. Gravin van Bylandt Stichting, Christelijke Mutualiteit Brugge, Stichting Fonds voor de Geld- en Effectenhandel, Stichting 'De Gijsselaar-Hintzenfonds', J.E. Jurriaanse Stichting, and Stichting Professor van Winter Fonds. Without their contributions this book would be far less colourful. And last but not least, we thank Anja van Leusden (Uitgeverij Verloren) for her enthusiasm and professional guidance during the production phase of our book.

The authors
On the eve of Saint Catherine

1 THE CODEX IN CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

Christine de Pizan is celebrated as France's first professional woman of letters. She was born in Venice around 1364 but lived for almost her entire life in France. Her father Tommaso di Benvenuto da Pizzano (d. 1387) was a professor of medicine and astrology at the University of Bologna before he moved the family to Paris (1368) to become the personal physician and court astrologer of the French king Charles V (r. 1364-1380). While as a woman she did not have access to university education, she was tutored by her erudite father who nourished her love of learning. In 1380, at the age of fifteen, she married Étienne de Castel, a notary and secretary at the royal court, ten years her senior and member of a respectable Picard family. The happy couple had three children; one of them died in infancy. Her otherwise serene life came to an abrupt end when she became a widow at the age of 25. Faced with the urgency of having to provide for her family, she turned to writing and focused on developing her authorship through self-education and study of the classics. Her year of death is assumed to be around 1430, shortly before Joan of Arc (whom she eulogized in her *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*, 1429) was burnt at the stake (May 30, 1431).¹

Her literary oeuvre was then and is still now impressive, both in the number of different works and in the variety of styles and genres. Christine's mastery ranged from love lyrics, allegorical poetry and biography, through didactic writings on women, to prose treatises on warfare and politics. Contemporary sources acknowledge that she was an extraordinary woman, talented, outspoken and respected by her patrons, Queen Isabeau of Bavaria and the dukes of Berry, Burgundy and Orléans.

One of her influential books on women was the *Livre de la Cité des Dames*. Composed between the end of 1404 and the summer of 1405, it was conceived as a response to the misogynistic writings of the time. In it, Christine uses the allegorical form to present the life and deeds of virtuous women as the metaphorical building blocks for the City of Ladies. Throughout this enterprise the first-person narrator, Christine herself, enjoys guidance and advice from three wise women, sent to her by God: Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude and Lady Justice. The French text is extant in eight presentation copies, produced under the author's close supervision: five individual manuscripts, one fragment, and two copies in collected works. Another 20 copies were made in later years.² The work was translated into several languages, of which Middle Dutch (in its Flemish variant) was first by a considerable margin.³

In 1475, some forty-five years after Christine's death, Jan de Baenst, a descendant of a prominent Bruges family active in the Bruges city council, commissioned a Flemish translation of the *Livre de la Cité des Dames*: *Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen*. As far as we know, this is the only work by Christine translated into Middle Dutch. It is extant in a single fifteenth-century manuscript now housed in the British Library in London (British Library, Add. 20698, hereafter: Add. 20698).⁴ The early translation is in itself noteworthy, but the codex in which it is transmitted is at least as remarkable in a number of other ways: it was intended to be exceptionally richly illuminated, it explicitly mentions the commissioner, and it transmits the translator's opinionated epilogue appended to the otherwise relatively faithful translation of the original.

Our study examines the backdrop against which this Flemish translation was conceived: the back-

¹ For a biography of Christine, see for example Pernoud (1982), Willard (1984), and Autrand (2009).

² Reno (2006); *City of Ladies* (1982), p. xlv, esp. n. 35. The first detailed study and critical edition of the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* is Curnow (1975). For a modern Dutch translation of the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* see *Het Boek van de stad der Vrouwen* (1984).

³ In this study we will use Middle Dutch and Flemish interchangeably. Technically Flemish is one of many regional variants of Middle Dutch.

⁴ The full text of *Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen* is available in a diplomatic transcription: see Versélewel de Witt Hamer and Oort (2008).

ground of the commissioner and his life in the Bruges cultural context; the codicological aspects of this exceptional manuscript; the extraordinary and highly original but – intriguingly – unfinished illumination programme; and the translator’s own additions to the text. Specific attention is paid to the codicological and art-historical features of the codex, as they shed light not only on our understanding of Middle Dutch literary book production in contemporary Bruges but, more importantly, on the reception of Christine de Pizan beyond her first aristocratic French audience.

BRUGES AROUND 1475

Flanders – including Bruges – had been added to the Burgundian territories in 1369 when Philip the Bold (1342–1404), brother of the reigning King of France Charles V, married Margaret of Mâle (1384–1405), the only daughter of Louis of Mâle, count of Flanders. The Burgundian presence initiated a period of financial and cultural prosperity that continued throughout the reigns of Philip the Good (1419–1467) and Charles the Bold (1467–1477). Bruges functioned as one of the main Flemish residences of the Burgundian court, and in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, was in its glory days as a thriving and prosperous commercial centre. The city initially derived its wealth from being a protected harbour and from the wool trade with England, before expanding into banking and emerging as the financial centre of northern Europe. As a result, the city became a source of wealth and power, where cosmopolitanism and cultural sophistication gained new momentum under the French-speaking Burgundians. Passionate patrons of the arts themselves, the Burgundians stimulated cultural productivity throughout their realm.⁵ Significantly, for the purpose of this study, their interests included the acquisition of luxurious manuscripts. Through their patronage, Bruges increased its already strong reputation as an important centre for book production.⁶

Philip the Good commissioned more than sixty manuscripts to complement an already substantial bibliophilic collection. Often, both text and illumination in these commissioned works served to justify his claim to power.⁷ The tone set by the highest rulers was emulated by their subjects, and we know several instances of Burgundian nobles acquiring their own copy of a manuscript they had seen in the collections of others. For example, the library of the aristocratic bibliophile Louis of Bruges (also known as Lodewijk van Gruuthuse) contained several volumes copied from manuscripts in the library of Philip the Good.⁸ Count Engelbert of Nassau, in turn, tried to outdo manuscripts in the collection of Louis of Bruges.⁹ In other words, the phenomenon of bibliophilic envy was very much alive in Burgundian circles in Bruges. Also in other aspects, noble subjects were inspired by their royal superiors: the preferred language of vernacular works was French, and content tended to favour exploits of famous heroes in history

⁵ Most scholarship mentions this fact, especially the effect of Burgundian patronage on Flemish art. For examples, see Prevenier and Blockmans (1986), esp. ‘Burgundian Culture’, pp. 282–360; Inglis (1995), pp. 1–9; *Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), esp. ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–13.

⁶ The cultural importance of book production in fifteenth-century Bruges is well documented. In addition to the studies cited above, see also *Vlaamse kunst op perkament* (1981); *Vlaamse miniaturen* (1997); Obbema (1996), pp. 22–26; Brinkmann (1997). For the importance of ducal patronage for illuminated codices, see Vanwijnsberghe (2002), pp. 264–265 and Wijsman (2010).

⁷ *Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), p. 3.

⁸ See *Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), pp. 59–78, esp. 71; Wijsman (2010), ‘Lodewijk van Gruuthuse’, pp. 356–368, esp. 366–368.

⁹ See Meuwese (2007).

through medieval and classical epics as well as mythology and political treatises.¹⁰ Another popular genre consisted of illuminated books for private devotion, particularly Books of Hours. These, too, were written predominantly in French or Latin.¹¹

This upsurge in manuscript acquisition with connections to Bruges resulted in a number of stunning collections. Philip the Good's library, for example, contained almost 1000 volumes, while Louis of Bruges owned nearly 200 codices.¹² By 1475 Bruges was also entering new modes of book production through a thriving early press, even though manuscript production and illumination continued well into the sixteenth century.

JAN III DE BAENST

Set in this context, Jan III de Baenst (c. 1420–1486) gains a profile as one who straddled the worlds of French nobility and Flemish patriciate. Nominally a knight and lord of some local territories (Sint-Joris, Beernem and Zoetschoore), he was a descendant of a distinguished Bruges family and active in city governance. While it is sometimes difficult to determine which of three generations by that name is referred to in archival documents (his grandfather, d. 1440, his father, d. 1460, or Jan III de Baenst himself), it is generally accepted that Jan III is the one mentioned in 1446 as bailiff of Bruges, and as prominent member of the Bruges city council from at least 1452 onwards.¹³ Definitely he is the only one who could have served two terms as mayor, from 1470–1471 and 1473–1474.¹⁴ In 1473, as mayor of Bruges, he escorted the body of Philip the Good from Ghent to Dijon.¹⁵

This escort honour also testifies to the De Baenst family's long-standing courtly and aristocratic contacts, and by 1475 – the year the Flemish translation was commissioned – they had firmly established themselves as leading citizens.¹⁶ Besides serving as advisors to Philip the Good and Charles the Bold, the family appears to have emulated the nobility by themselves becoming patrons of the arts. For example, it has been suggested that De Baenst donated the eighth panel of the Ursula altarpiece (dated 1475–1482) to the convent of Augustinian nuns at Bruges.¹⁷ He also used his wealth and status to found a convent for

10 The almost exclusive use of French by the Burgundian court, even in Bruges, is emphasized by Van Coolput-Storms (2000), esp. p. 42.

11 For some examples completed in Bruges, see Harthan (1977) and Inglis (1995), pp. 9–12. For some Middle Dutch codices from Bruges, see *Flemish illuminated manuscripts* (1996), pp. 204–205, 208–210, as well as *Medieval Mastery* (2002), cat. no. 69, pp. 276–277.

12 The library of the Dukes of Burgundy consisted of nearly 1000 volumes, of which the approximately 300 housed at the Royal Library of Belgium in Brussels are in the process of being catalogued: see Bousmanne, Van Hemelryck and Van Hoorebeeck (2000). So far four of the planned eight volumes have been published. See also Smeyers (1999); *Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), pp. 68–69. For a recent survey of the library of Philip the Good and other members of the aristocracy, see Wijsman (2010), esp. Chapters 8 and 9, pp. 219–480.

13 Buylaert (2005); cf. Van Hoorebeeck (2007).

14 Blockmans (1968), esp. p. 73. See also Buylaert (2005), pp. 204–208.

15 *Vlaamse kunt op perkament* (1981), p. 276.

16 Buylaert (2005), pp. 204–209, 214–218. Curnow (1975), pp. 305–306, repeats earlier scholarship in stating that he was advisor to Philip the Good (Duke from 1419–1467), but that position was held by his father (Buylaert (2005), p. 204). We do know that his connections to Charles the Bold were of the sort to affect him in the political upheavals after Charles's death in battle in 1477.

17 Cf. Van Hoorebeeck (2007), pp. 47–48. Although this attribution is often repeated, there is no proof that De Baenst was indeed the patron. The altarpiece is currently in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. The painter is unknown. The panels were attributed to Dieric Bouts in the nineteenth century, and subsequently to a contemporary of Memling. The panels were almost certainly painted before 1482, since the belfry is shown without its octagonal superstructure. See

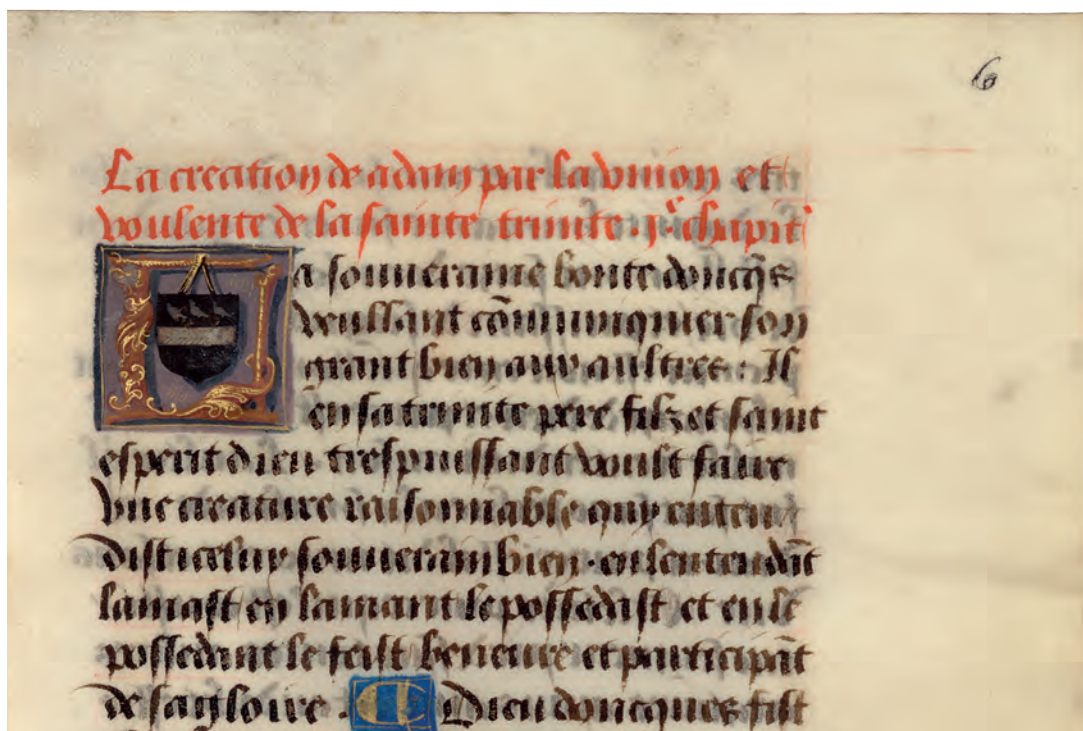


Fig. 1 Arms of Jan III de Baenst painted in the opening initial of the *Pénitence d'Adam*. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, 5092, f. 6r. [Copyright: Bibliothèque nationale de France]

Franciscans in 1461, and undertook several pilgrimages to the Holy Land.¹⁸

We do know that De Baenst was a bibliophile to a level that suited his station, acquiring a personal library of which four codices have been identified definitely to date.¹⁹ Two of them explicitly mention De Baenst as the commissioner. In the colophon of the two-volume copy of Augustine's *Cité de Dieu* in the French translation by Raoul de Presles, 'Jehan de Baenst' as patron and the date 1470 are given (Lille, BM, 647-648, olim 90-91).²⁰ The second codex with explicit reference to De Baenst as its patron is *Het Bouc van de Stede der Vrouwen*, the subject of our study.

The other two codices were not made for him originally but acquired from others. A codex containing *La pénitence d'Adam* and the *Histoire de la vraie croix* (Paris, Arsenal, 5092) is a prose translation from the

<http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>

¹⁸ Smallegange (1696), p. 402; this passage mentions that Jan de Baenst visited the Saint Catherine convent in the Sinai and that he met the Turkish Emperor three times. Buylaert (2005), pp. 203-204, questions the reliability of this source. De Baenst's pilgrimages and membership of a religious society of pilgrims to the Holy Land centred around Anselm Adornes at the Jerusalem chapel in Bruges, are mentioned, for example, in Van Hoorebeek (2007), p. 51.

¹⁹ Wijsman (2010), 'Jan de Baenst', p. 493; Van Hoorebeek (2007), pp. 50-53. Some scholars also attribute a fifth codex to Jan de Baenst, an illuminated manuscript of Virgil's *Aeneid*, made in 1473 for Jan Crabbe, Abbot of the Ter Duinen Monastery (Holkham Hall, Coll. Earl of Leicester, 311). Others find it more plausible that the manuscript was acquired later in the fifteenth century by his nephew, Paul de Baenst (1442-1492): see the discussion in Van Hoorebeek (2007), pp. 60-63; Wijsman (2010), p. 493, esp. n. 71; *Splendours of Flanders* (1993), p. 207.

²⁰ Cf. Van Hoorebeek (2007), p. 52: 'Cy fine le X^e livre de la cité de Dieu fait et accomply en décembre, l'an mil CCCCLXX, au commandement de mon très-honouré seigneur et maistre, messire Jehan de Baenst, seigneur de St-Jorge, par moy Remerchier. Scriptor qui scripsit cum xpo vivere possit' (f. 427v). The exhibition catalogue dates the manuscript to 1472-1486: *Vlaamse miniaturen* (2011), cat. no. 93.

Fig. 2 The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Opening miniature of Jan III de Baenst's *Pénitence d'Adam*, copied from the manuscript made for Louis of Bruges. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, 5092, f. 5v. [Copyright: Bibliothèque nationale de France]



Communit' Adam et Eve fuerunt chas /
sez hors de paradis terrestre . et de leur /
grande penitance . Premier chapitre .

Latin original made by Colard Mansion in 1472 for Louis of Bruges.²¹ The De Baenst arms, discussed further below, occur in an initial on f. 6r (fig. 1). This manuscript, adorned with an opening miniature representing the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise (fig. 2) and with numerous gold initials and rubrics, was directly made from Louis of Bruges' manuscript (Paris, BnF, fr. 1837; fig. 3).²² The second codex, an illuminated Book of Hours in Latin (Brussels, KBR, IV 746), entered Jan de Baenst's library at an unknown date. In this codex De Baenst's ownership was claimed in several ways: a full-page miniature displaying his arms and emblem was added on an originally blank flyleaf (fig. 4); a full-page *Vera Icon* (a miniature of Saint Veronica holding the *sudarium*) was inserted at the front of the book (fig. 5).²³ His coat of arms was

²¹ Lemaire and De Schryver (1981).

²² Cf. Van Hooebeek (2007), pp. 51–52; *Vlaamse kunst op perkament* (1981), pp. 274–277 suggests that the illuminator of the Adam and Eve miniature is the same artist who painted the presentation miniature in Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum* of Jan Crabbe (Bruges, Grootseminarie, 154/44). See also *Vlaamse miniaturen* (2011), cat. no. 93.

²³ The *Vera Icon* is a common representation for pilgrimage in general, or more specifically for the pilgrimage to Rome where the *sudarium* was kept as a relic, see Van Asperen (2010), pp. 185, 313. There are also traces of the former presence of genuine pilgrim's badges kept in his *Book of Hours*.