Christine de Pizan in her study

Susan Groag Bell
Christine de Pizan in her study

Susan Groag Bell

1 The image of Christine in her study is enthralling – I expect all who know her work and have seen some of the illustrations in her manuscripts feel the same about it.¹ Ever since I first became involved with her I have been seduced by the idea of this amazing woman in her book-lined cell, expounding for our delight her love of learning and her pleasure in her work.

2 At the back of my mind as I have thought about Christine in her study has been the idea of “creativity”, as well as the question: where does inspiration come from? What leads us to think creatively? Much has been written by scholars of Christine de Pizan about the many authors, such as Boccaccio, Boethius, and Dante whose works she used and transformed into her own writings. What interests me here is how she created her own particular brand of figures to shape her books and give them their focus. At what point of her compositions did she have the idea of using, for example Reason, Rectitude and Justice in the Cité des dames, or Dame Opinion and Dame Philosophy in L’Advision, or The Cumean Sibyl in Le Chemin de longue Estude and then wove these together into the various transformations of her texts. I am not now thinking of Christine’s obvious proto-feminism, I am curious about the times and reasons when Christine’s study was helpful for ideas to strike. I believe the arrangement of the room in which she worked had an influence on her creativity.

3 The term study was already in use as a place for education and work in the 13th century both in French and in English. The Grand Robert² defines étude in 1216 as “lieu ou s’exercice cet effort de l’esprit, cette studieuse activité”. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the 1309 meaning of “Study” as follows: “A room furnished with books and used for private study, reading, writing, or the like.”³ It is also used by Christine’s contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer with this meaning in the Franklin’s Tale in 1386. In this article I will describe the physical layout of Christine’s study and the disposition of her desk and writing tools and compare these with the manner in which the illustrators of her manuscripts depicted it. But I will also define her study as a place of learning and then of creating something new from the learned material.
Christine herself has various names for the room in which she created her work: “ma cele”4; “une estude petite”5 “ma chambre”6. At the very end of her letter to Dechamps she wrote specifically: “Escript seullette en m’estude” and then the date, the 10th of February, 1403.7 As part of this article I will compare what she herself tells us about her life in her study, with the illustrations in her manuscripts. We know, of course, that Christine communicated with artists because she herself told us so in her statement about Anastasia who produced such beautiful manuscript borders and miniature backgrounds. Yet many of the illustrations to her works were created after the texts had been written, and in some cases as long as twenty years after Christine had died, thus we must hope that at least some of her artists had seen her place of work. Whether this was so or not, the artists’ imaginative reconstructions of her study are enormously helpful to understanding the layout of her study.

The book-lined cell or sacellum was a feature of Latinist humanist scholars of the early renaissance. It is perhaps not irrelevant here to remind ourselves of Christine’s Italian humanist background. Her parents’ roots in Bologna and Venice and connections in those areas of Italy would surely have continued through correspondence. She may well have known of Maddalena Scrovegni living as a young widow in Padua, who inspired the poet Antonio Loschi (ca 1390) to praise her as follows: “Your virtues, your manner of life… so moved me, and a vision of your little cell [sacellum], that one place in your father’s house which you had chosen and set aside for silence, for study…”9

By the time Christine began the Cité des dames which she completed in 1405 she stated firmly that it had become the “habit of my life” to study literature (in which she included history)10 and as usual she was sitting in her cell. But how did this become such a habit? It is pretty clear that the catastrophe, the sudden death of her husband, (what she allegorically thought of as “the shipwreck of her life”) drove her to express her grief in the outpouring of mourning poetry. Charity Willard11 went so far as to say that Christine herself recognized that it was her great misfortunes when her husband Etienne died in 1390, leaving her aged 25, with three children, which forced her into the life of scholarship, which gave her such pleasure.

As we know, in short order she had lost three important supports: the King, her father and her husband. The financial, political and emotional support of King Charles V was a model for her in his love of learning and his collection of one of the most renowned libraries in Europe. Christine actually described the king’s study with great immediacy as though she had been there and had examined some of his books. It was “neat and polished and well organized” she wrote.12 In a copy of John of Salisbury’s Policraticus (Fig. 1) Charles V is sitting in an opulent throne-like chair surrounded by a large number of his books on a rotating bookstand, with two small monkeys perched at each side, with the hand of God reaching down to him.13 The inventory of his studies in several of his palaces gives examples of silver inkwells, lamps, mirrors and other luxurious items useful to the reader and writer.14 Secondly, Christine lost the support of her father Thomas de Pizan, who had loved and educated her instead of the first-born son he had desired. Finally, she lost her beloved husband Etienne. Thus she was forced to rely on her own resources—one might say to become the captain of her ship as she described it in her later works, the Mutacion de Fortune, and L’Advision.
Fig. 1. Charles V in his study

Of the illustrations of Christine in her cell the best known of all in the twenty-first century is probably one that accompanies the *Cent Ballades*, in the Queen's Manuscript of 1411-12, now in the British Library (Fig. 2). In this important manuscript of her collected work presented to Queen Isabeau and produced between 1411-12, Christine is, usually (but not always) portrayed in a blue gown with a white headdress.
The other illustration from the *Cent Ballades* (Fig. 3) is from the Duke de Berry’s Manuscript of 1405 now in the Bibliothèque nationale (BnF) in Paris. Here again Christine sits in her study writing at her desk in a blue gown and a similar white headdress. The room has a rosy hue, perhaps from the red cloth covering the desk upon which Christine is writing. A dark vessel stands in one of the windows.

These illustrations were painted long after the poems were written in the 1390s, when Christine was recovering from the disasters that had overtaken her and her whole family. She had been ill as well, and she finally found a way of recovering her physical and emotional health through the psychologically well recognized cure: that is work. And let us make no mistake about it, writing poetry is hard work. At this time, she was as yet unknown as an author and wrote not so much for remuneration as for her own comfort. We know, however, that she won a poetry prize for her *Cent Ballades*. Nor, at that time, was she financially capable of employing artists to illustrate her work.
Perhaps the little white dog by her side, clearly the same dog in both pictures, was also there to comfort her. A different dog reappears in the study illustration of the Mutacion de Fortune, created by the workshop of the Cité des dames now in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Christine in her study

*Mutacion de fortune.* This time a different dog is beside the desk. Munich, Codex gall. 11, f° 2r. Unfortunately this illustration could not be included as the reproduction fees are beyond the acceptable range.

11 The study here is grander and more ambitious, as is the headdress and the room has more important windows and a potted plant on one of the windowsills. Several books are scattered on the desk which is covered with a green cloth, whereas the previous two portraits of the poet are simpler and the cell is somewhat bare. Cheerful tiles cover the floors in these rooms, especially the floor tiles in the Duke’s manuscript (Fig. 3) have an intricate design of brilliant red and dark colors.

12 By the time Christine had turned from the mourning poems and the various other short love poems and created what she considered her more serious work whether this was poetry or prose she had found her own voice and become very used to the surroundings of her study. It was in these longer pieces that she manages to imbue us with a strong and warm sense of familiarity of her immediate place of work. The first time she does so is in *Le Chemin de Long Estude* which, she tells us precisely she began on October 5th 1402 and presented to the Duke de Berry on March 30th 1403. Here she wrote, she felt desolate and having “long been without any pleasure” she sat in her small study “dans une estude petite”16 where she often found delight in reading (“Ou souvent je me delite a regarder escriptures”). But darkness had fallen and so she called for a light. We understand that as she “called for a light” (Si huchay de la lumiere)17 she had a servant to do her bidding. Somehow, Christine sitting alone in her study is not quite as solitary as she might appear. Certainly she was not as solitary as a twentieth or twenty-first century woman scholar might be. (Although she surely lacked the colleagues with whom we can discuss our work). Servants would bring lights and possibly other items she might need. Thus, Christine sat in her study, and continued to read by candlelight or an oil lamp. And so she found, the famous book, as she said: “Le livre qui tant est notable”18 Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which among others she used to console herself AND to work into some of her own writing (for example into the *Advision*.19

13 The study illustration to manuscript No. 10982 of *Le chemin de longue estude* in Brussels shows her in an elaborate hexagonal room with a tartan-like hanging behind her, sitting at a table contemplating several books and in this manuscript the illustrations are done in delicate colors mostly as grisailles. She finally went to bed and dreamed that she was visited by the Cumean Sibyl. In this dream, which we know as *Le Chemin de Longue Estude*, the Sibyl introduced her to a million pleasures. These pleasures Christine later converted into her own books. As she wrote in *Le Livre du Corps de policie*, knowledge is not valuable unless it can be passed on to others.20 The artist who painted...
the illumination of the Sibyl at Christine's bedside in Queen Isabeau's manuscript in the British Library (Fig. 5) was obviously impressed with all that learning stuffed into Christine’s head so that he drew it quite out of proportion.

**Fig. 5. The Cumean Sibyl at Christine’s bedside**


The only other such disproportionate head in a Christine manuscript is that of the Sea monster in the *Othea* (Fig. 6).
It is not too far fetched to speculate that some men in the early Renaissance considered a solitary learned woman to be a monster. Learned women threatened humanist men and, as Margaret King wrote, “not surprisingly other women despised them”. King also theorized that because of this antagonism to their scholarship learned women of the early renaissance preferred to study sacred texts and were overly careful about their chastity, often withdrawing to convents. We know that Christine also counseled other women to take extreme care of their reputation, for example in the *Livre de Trois Vertus* and elsewhere. It is occasionally thought that she was rather too prim. No doubt she also feared the sharp tongues of her contemporaries who might have felt threatened by her scholarship.

Far from worrying about her reputation however, Christine tortured herself with the thought that she had not profited by the opportunities she had for study in her younger days. She railed at the blindness and ignorance of youth, including her own, in that “like a young and pampered fool” she thought that everything good would last forever. And she then went into a paean of praise for learning in that famously passionate paragraph in the *Advice*: “Ah learning: sweet, savory and honeyed thing supreme and pre-eminent among all other treasures! How happy are they who taste you fully!” This passage makes it very clear that Christine’s scholarship would have overcome all disparagement and jealousy, and it cements interest and admiration for her. Moreover, Christine reveled in her creativity. As Dame Nature predicted in the *Advice*, Christine would create delightful works (“chooses delictables”).

Christine’s pleasure was accompanied by hard and skilled work. She was not only a creator of extraordinarily interesting and original books; she was a scribe and is
carefully represented as such in many of her manuscripts. Unfortunately, we do not have any inventories that would show us what items her study contained. However, the illustrations in her manuscripts even if they were not executed until some years after she wrote her texts are very helpful.

18 We know that she wrote her presentation poetry and prose on vellum, (also called parchment) the laboriously treated animal skins, which she would have bought from a parchment maker.26 By 1292 nineteen parchment makers plied their trade in Paris and by the late 14th century when Christine began to write, there must have been many more.27 However, it is also possible that she often wrote on paper which was certainly less expensive and less durable. The manuscripts presented to her royal patrons would surely be on parchment and thus hugely expensive. Christopher de Hamel gives a variety of prices, suggesting “three sous per skin, which he calls a considerable sum.”28 We also know from the accounts of the Dukes of Burgundy that Christine was paid substantial sums for her books, for example in the following case from the accounts of John the Fearless:

To Demoiselle Christine de Pisan, widow of the late Master Estienn e du Castel, a gift of 100 crowns, made to her by my lord the duke, for and in acknowledgement of two books which she has presented to my lord the duke, one of which was commissioned from her by the late duke of Burgundy, father of the present duke [Charles the Bold], ... shortly before he died. Since then she has finished this book and my lord the duke has it instead of his father. The other book my lord the duke wanted to have himself, and... he takes much pleasure in these two books and in other of her epistles and writings...29

19 Many of the illustrations show Christine sitting at her desk either reading or writing with a pen and pen-knife in her hands. Usually the pen is in her right hand and the knife in the left. We can hardly assume from these paintings that she was right handed, although it is certainly most likely that she wrote with her right hand. The pen-knife was essential for three reasons, first to sharpen the quill, second to erase mistakes very fast before the ink had dried, and third to hold the place in a manuscript that was being copied. Christine presumably paused to think while composing her books, although she also worked as a scribe when copying her own books for other patrons. The cut across the tip of the quill would open with use and required frequent sharpening with the blade pulled towards the writer. Christopher de Hamel suggests that a busy scribe would sharpen her pen as often as sixty times during a working day.30 de Hamel incidentally points out that there were a “gratifying number of women scribes.”31 So in this activity Christine was not unique.

20 On Christine’s desk, as was usual with medieval writers, were a variety of items. In the miniatures of her manuscripts we see ink-wells, sometimes ink pots with lids, the latter could be attached to long and narrow pen-holders containing several pens. The ink had to be carefully contained to remain dark and glutinous. Inkwells were usually made of lead. The ink was made of carbon or a mixture of crushed oak apples in which gall wasps had laid their eggs, mixed with rainwater, white wine or vinegar. It would be interesting to know whether Christine or her mother or servants prepared her ink, for which process various medieval recipes existed.32 Another essential item on the desk was the sand-box for strewing sand over the ink to dry it quickly and evenly. Thus, manuscript illustrations (Figs. 2, 3, 4, 7, 15 and 24) show inkwells each with two compartments the second perhaps for sand. Fig. 7 has a small round inkpot on the other side as well. Figs. 14 and 29 have a long narrow pen holder lying on the desk.
Fig. 14 shows the inkpot attached by a cord to the penholder so that it may be carried around.

Fig. 7. Christine in her study

*Livre du Corps de Policie*. Paris, BnF, Ms. Fr. 2681, f° 4r. Unfortunately this illustration could not be included as the reproduction fees are beyond the acceptable range.

Fig. 8. Christine in her study

*Long Estude*. Chantilly, Ms. 492, f° 2r. Reproduced with kind Permission of the Musée Condé,

21 One of the most interesting items to be seen in the illustrations of Christine in her study is the mirror on her desk in manuscript Ms. Fr. 603 of the *Mutacion de Fortune* now in the Bibliothèque nationale (Fig. 15). Mirrors for scholars at this time had several uses. First, their refreshing qualities of reflection protected against eye-strain. The reflections they produced lit up dark chambers; they also made small rooms appear larger. Most important and useful for scholars, was the fact that they enlarged small, and even faded scripts that a reader like Christine was often forced to decipher.20 Even though the mirror would reverse the script the enlargement would assist the reader. The mirror would probably have been made of polished steel a practice known since classical antiquity. Glass mirrors were invented in the fourteenth century in Germany and were difficult and very expensive to acquire elsewhere. The mirror shown in the Duke’s Ms. Fr. 603 in the Bibliothèque nationale was set in a wooden surround and
stands about a foot tall. Petrarch had a mirror exactly like Christine’s in this illustration on his desk in a drawing from ca 1400 supposedly showing him in his “studio”. Jean de Meun discusses the usefulness of mirrors, especially their capacity to enlarge and clarify objects in the *Roman de la Rose*. “Nature” explains the mirror’s powers: “A glass can make the smallest things –grains of powdered sand or letters small seem great and to the observer bring them close... or to read the smallest script.”

Fig. 9. Christine in her study

*Mutacion de Fortune*. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, Ms. 9508, f° 2.
Reproduced with kind permission.
Fig. 10. Christine in her study

*Mutacion de Fortune*. The Hague, Royal Library, Ms. 78 D42, f° 1.
With kind permission.
Fig. 11. Christine in her study

Le Livre de la Cité des dames. A larger and more opulent room than in previous manuscripts. This belonged to Walpurge de Meurs, wife of Philippe de Croy. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, Ms. 9235, f° 3. Reproduced with kind permission.
Fig. 12. Christine reading in her study

Le Livre de la Cité des dames. Copyright of the Bibliothèque de Genève, Ms. Fr. 180, f° 3v.
Reproduced with kind permission.
Fig. 13. Christine instructs her son in her study

British Library, Ms. Harley 4431, f° 261.
Reproduced with kind permission of the British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.
Fig. 14. Christine instructs four men

Reproduced with kind permission of the British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.
Christine’s study, as depicted in these illustrations was well lit, airy and sunny during the day. Many of them show magnificent almost cathedral-like windows (Figs. 2, 3, 4, 7, 12, 13, 15, 18). One assumes that the grandeur of some of these windows was painted with artistic license. However, her cell clearly possessed windows. She told us explicitly in the early part of the Cité des dames that she was sitting “in a shadow where the sun could not have shone at that hour.” But, “my doors were shut,” she says in the same passage, so had they been open, light might have come through doors as well at least in the summer. Moreover, in this beginning of the Cité des dames she called her workroom her “cell.” She would certainly understand about cells as her daughter presumably lived in one in the Abbey of Poissy where Christine had visited her at least once already, on a Monday towards the end of April 1400, before she wrote the Cité. Christine describes this abbey as “rich and precious” and although she does not mention windows in the 200 women’s cells, it follows from her detailed description of the beauty of the chambers, the gardens and the grandeur and design of the cloister, the napery during the luncheon, all of which suffuses the poem that windows would have been a feature of the cells. In any case it is reasonable to assume that Christine’s study or cell was light and airy and that it also provided privacy and solitude.

We are much aware of Christine, the solitary scholar in her study. Innumerable illustrations in her manuscripts depict her there alone. Her poetry has emphasized the character of her loneliness. “Seulete suy et seulete vueil estre” is supposedly emblematic of her condition. In the AdVision she wrote of “the solace of my scholarly solitary life.” I have no doubt that at first she chose the scholarly life to which she fled as to a refuge after the disastrous shipwreck of her marriage. It served also as an
antidote to the troubles of her widowhood and the crass treatment she received in the law courts when she attempted to fight her own legal battles. It offered her a world of ideas populated by historical and as well as imaginary figures who were perhaps even more companionable than the aristocrats on the periphery of whose world she actually lived.

Nevertheless Christine was not always quite alone in her cell, however much she may have delighted in that scholarly solitude. First we know of several real people, for example the servants who came at her behest to bring lights. Her mother was very much a presence in Christine’s household now that both women were widowed. So for example she told us that she was wakened from her long “dream” journey of the Chemin de Long Estude, which she completed in 1402, by her mother’s knock on her door. The mother was astonished that her daughter had overslept. Here is another of Christine’s small touches that offers us a clue to the intimate situation of her life. In other words: her mother lived in Christine’s household and knew the rhythm of her life. A few years later in 1405, she again presented us with another comfortable domestic moment: ensconced in her study she had been reading too long into the evening and her mother called her to supper –Christine did not cook for herself or her family.

Further, we see her, in her study, instructing her son (Fig. 13) –and even more impressively, again in her study, instructing four men in Les Proverbes Moreaux (Fig. 14). Here she followed her own precepts from the Livre du Corps de Policie in that she not only converted her massive learning into her writings, but also into teaching. Those are the real people who visited her in her study about whom we know. Surely there were others who are not necessarily mentioned in her books.

The Duke of True Lovers, that enigmatic figure, however, may, or may not have been a real person. In 1908 Alice Kemp Welch identified him as Jean Duc de Bourbon who might have had a love affair with Marie, the daughter of the famous Duc de Berri. No later Christine scholar has taken up this challenge, and in fact literary scholars are dubious that an actual person could be identified as “the Duke of True Lovers”. So the splendid miniature in the Queen’s manuscript which shows the Duke coming to visit Christine in her study, in order to beg her to write his story is quite likely a literary as well as an artistic device (Fig. 16). Even so it is interesting that in the Queen’s manuscript, the Duke visits Christine in her study with his entourage, whereas in the manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale she is summoned to his palace. Nevertheless the “Duke of True Lovers” has not so far been identified as a real person to appear in her study and thus is a sort of in-between figure leading us to those fictitious characters who filled Christine’s imagination.
The imaginary visitors who came to Christine in her study were those who, following the common medieval literary conceit, appeared in her dreams. In the _Advision_ she is visited by Dame Opinion, Dame Nature, and Dame Philosophy. The Cumean Sybil accompanied her in her dream on her _Chemin de Long Estude_, the Three Virtues who entered her cell in a “ray of light as though it were the sun” and ordered her to write the _Cité des dames_ (Fig. 17); Minerva (“an Italian woman like Christine”) who came and helped her to compose the _Livre des Fais d’armes_ (Figs. 23, 24). Many scholars have analyzed Christine’s dream books. However, I would like to consider some of these imaginary visitors in the place where the dreams occurred.
In the *Cité des dames* Christine describes in detail how she fell asleep sitting in her chair, with her elbow on its arm and her chin in her hand, deeply depressed after reading Matheolus’s diatribe against women. And some artists have faithfully recreated this image (Figs. 18, 19, 20). It was here that the Three Virtues arrive in that famous “ray of light as though it were the sun” and presumably without walking through her door.

**Fig. 18. The Three Virtues appear in Christine’s study in a ray of light**

*Le Livre de la Cité des dames.* Paris, BnF, Ms. F. fr. 1177, f° 3. Unfortunately this illustration could not be included as the reproduction fees are beyond the acceptable range.
Fig. 19. The Three Virtues appear in Christine’s study

Le Livre de la Cité des dames. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, Ms. 9235, f° 5.
Reproduced with kind permission.
Fig. 20. The Three Virtues appear in Christine’s study in a ray of light

The ray of light is clearly seen in the paintings of the scene in (Figs. 18 and 20). It is one the best known mental pictures we have of Christine with the three virtues “Reason, Rectitude and Justice.” Nevertheless, artists in the great Queen’s manuscript in the British Library (Fig. 21) and the manuscript of the Duke de Berri in the BN (Fig. 22) show her standing by her desk.
Fig. 21. The Three Virtues appear in Christine’s study as she stands at her desk

Le Livre de la Cité des dames. Christine and Reason begin to build the wall of the city. British Library, Ms. Harley, 4431, f° 290.
With kind permission of the British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

Fig. 22. The Three Virtues appear in Christine’s study as she stands at her desk

Le Livre de la Cité des dames. Paris, BnF, Ms. fr. 607, f° 2. Unfortunately this illustration could not be included as the reproduction fees are beyond the acceptable range.

Perhaps she simply stood up to welcome her visitors, or possibly, like Virginia Woolf she would occasionally write standing up. A Room of One’s Own, clearly echoes Christine de Pizan’s delight in her solitary study in many fascinating ways. Christopher de Hamel has shown very clearly that writing with quill pens and penknives in both hands requires a certain position of holding the pen which might actually be easier in an erect position. So, one can well imagine that it would sometimes be a comfort to the scribe to change physical position. However, as Christine explicitly stated that she fell asleep in her chair, this vision in the Cité des dames is obviously also a dream vision. But her other dreams occurred in her bed, again as she explicitly told us and as her artists faithfully depicted.

Thus, we know first (Fig. 9) the most famous dream vision of Le Chemin de Long Estude with the Sibyl appearing at the sleeping Christine’s bedside. Then, we know the goddess of war “Minerva” to whom Christine appealed for help when she decided to write a book on warfare for the dauphin, the duke of Guyenne. However Minerva was not as useful to her as Honoré Bouvet Fig. 25, the author of L’Arbre des batailles (The Tree of Battles), which he had composed between the years 1386-1389. He appeared at her bedside as she lay asleep surrounded by books. She wrote, and I quote from the significant first English translation by William Caxton of 1488: “as surprysed with slepe
lyenge upon my bed [my emphasis]” this stately and wise man praised Christine’s great and unceasing love of literary studies, and had therefore “now come for to be as to thy helpe in the perfourmynge of this present boke…”

Fig. 25. Honoré Bouvet appears at Christine’s bedside

This illustration brings me to an important point I want to make about Christine’s physical study. Not only was it lit by windows and had a door for complete privacy. The study also contained her bed. We know from various sources that people’s sleeping arrangements were cramped and that peasants usually shared their sleeping quarters with their animals. It was also common for royalty to receive people in rooms containing their beds. We only have to remember the famous illustration of Queen Isabeau with her ladies in waiting as Christine presents her manuscript (Fig. 26). As late as the 17th century Abraham Bosse depicted a ladies’ dinner party (Fig. 27) with the bed a prominent feature of the same room. More importantly for my purposes here: (Fig. 28) is the author Jean Mielot in his study, copying a manuscript for his patron Philip the Good of Burgundy (ca 1450) with a bed in an alcove snugly behind his desk. And finally in this manuscript of the Livre de fais d’armes, now in Brussels, Christine’s study also showing her bed in the alcove behind her (Fig. 29). Not surprisingly reading in her study or cell had become a comfortable habit.
Fig. 26. Christine presenting her manuscript to Queen Isabeau who is surrounded by her ladies in waiting in front of her elegant large bed

British Library, Ms. Harley 4431, f° 3.
Reproduced with kind permission of the British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

Fig. 27. Ladies dinner party with grand bed in dining room

Abraham Bosse, 17th century.

Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes, Varia
Fig. 28. Jean Mielot copying a manuscript for Philip the Good, ca 1450

![Image of Jean Mielot copying a manuscript for Philip the Good]

Note the bed in alcove of his workroom. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, Ms. 9278-80, f° 10.
With kind permission.
The Brussels manuscript Ms. 9010 and especially folio 118 (Fig. 29) which shows Christine sitting in her study on one of those small stools often visible in her room, was written by Jacquemart Pilavaine. It is one of the few of her manuscripts where we have clear evidence from the scribe. Pilavaine who was active in Mons some twenty to thirty years after Christine’s death, wrote at the end of Le Livre des fais d’armes et de chevalerie: “Cy fine le livre qui traite des droits d’armes escript par moy Jacquemart Pilavaine”.47

Pilavaine, a popular scribe and illuminator worked for Philip the Good of Burgundy in Mons around 1450.48 Anke Esch has attempted to identify Pilavaine’s illustrations and marginal borders from the large selection of paintings in various fifteenth century manuscripts but it is not at all clear which of these works can be attributed to him.49 In his 1858 biography Jacmart Pilavaine, miniaturiste du XVe siècle, Léon Paulet supposed that Pilavaine had both written the manuscripts and painted their illuminations.50 This, according to Anke Esch is erroneous. Esch suggests that the painter of the illuminations was “The Master of Philippe de Croy”.51 And indeed the phrase “escript par moy” only makes clear that he had copied the text of Christine’s Le Livre des fais d’armes et de la chevalerie.

But what of the illuminations in this copy? Christine’s manuscript is the central one of three bound manuscripts between Bouvet’s Arbre de Batailles and L’ordonance sur le duel judiciaire de Philippe le Bel (Brussels Ms 9009-9011).52 Both illustrations in this manuscript are significant for understanding the layout of her study. The second, (Fig. 25) (fol. 181) shows her asleep in bed with Honoré Bouvet hands raised, imparting his knowledge of battles to the sleeping author. The bed with a bright blue coverlet is surrounded by curtains, and on the wall behind Christine’s head hangs a painting of a
crucifixion scene. This unframed painting is reminiscent of a modern student’s simple print or poster tacked onto the wall. Roughly a dozen books are piled onto the windowsill and onto a cabinet by the bed. The window looks out upon a verdant landscape. This illustration is to my knowledge the only one which shows books to be part of what appears to be the bedroom. That is, until one carefully examines the other illustration in this manuscript. Here Christine sits at her desk which is covered with books (Fig. 29) fol. 118. This desk turns out to be the very cabinet shown in the bedroom scene (Fig. 25), fol. 181. Both the window-sill covered with books and the view over the verdant landscape are identical in both paintings.

What is very different from all other manuscript illustrations showing Christine de Pizan sitting at her desk is the fact that the desk (clearly the cabinet of the other painting) with half opened doors underneath, is situated in front of her bed (now with a pink coverlet instead of the blue one in the illumination on folio 181). The large bed with its curtains is in an alcove of the study. The artist seems to have had a little difficulty in executing the perspective of the walls to demonstrate the position of the alcove within the study. He did so by slightly changing the direction and colors of the floor tiles hoping thereby to indicate less light in the alcove, thus giving the floor a somewhat “escheresque” flavor, reminiscent of M. C. Escher’s symmetry drawings.

Christine’s bed here is more opulent than that of Jean Mielot (Fig. 28) but it is clearly shown as part of the room in which she worked.

In her splendidly informative and evocative book The Scholar in his Study. Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy (1997), Dora Thornton expended some six pages on “Night-time Study” and “the Study Bed-Chamber.” She is, however, more concerned with Italian collectors’ desire to protect and show off their beautiful and artistic items than scholars’ search for the best place to think, write and create their work. Even so, Thornton emphasizes the need for the studies of Renaissance men and a few women (notably Maddalena Scrovegni and Isabella d’Este) of the 15th and 16th centuries not only for security to protect their treasures, but also for privacy. For reasons of security and privacy then, studies were often positioned next to bedchambers or the owner’s bed placed inside the study. Christine de Pizan’s study-bedchamber was not a treasure-house in which to display her art collection, although she obviously kept her precious books in it. Mostly it was a place in which to think, to meditate and to write.

What I have been leading up to with all these thoughts and illustrations of Christine’s study is to consider from whence her inspiration came. She read in her study, she wrote in it, and she slept and dreamed in it. However much we take from the books we read we must somehow transform those ideas into a new coherent idea of our own. Christine (as many of us have shown) by no means simply paraphrased what she took from Boccacio, or from Boethius, or from Dante, or Ovid, or Bouvet or Augustine. We know she often transformed what she read into very original ideas of her own. I would like to suggest that the architecture and arrangement of the room in which she worked was so constructed that she was able to relax and meditate in great comfort. The bed shown in those illustrations of the Long Estude and Le Livre de fais d’armes is a very important part of her working life. She could not however write in it (as we can with a pencil or a laptop). She required her ink-pot as shown in many of those illustrations on her desk. She could not read in bed, because most of the books she used for her work were rolls or far too large and heavy. But she could think in bed. And I would suggest that her so-called dreams were inspired meditations in which she invented the Cumean
Sibyl, and Honoré Bouvet (and of course the “Three Virtues” of the “City of Ladies”) as vehicles for the transmission of her books. Sometimes her dreams coalesced with her thoughts at the point of falling asleep or of waking. The bed in her study was not unlike the sofas we find in the offices or “studies” of the writers or academics in later centuries. The physical relaxation that comes with stretching out horizontally is an important component to deep thought. A spark often strikes at the moment between waking and sleeping. Reverie, meditation, call it what you will, is a vital part of scholarship, and this leads to creativity. In describing her thought processes, the husband of the author of A Room of One’s Own explained that she spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about her work. For Virginia Woolf, rest and sleep were essential to solve literary problems. And so it was with Christine: “surprised with sleep lying upon my bed” when she invented Honoré Bouvet’s help. By no means did this unique woman always sit upright in her chair. The bed is a meaningful element of the furniture in Christine’s study. Many famous authors, for example Proust, and Winston Churchill have composed in bed. Peaceful surroundings are vital for those whose inspiration comes to them in this way, and by imagining for us the details of Christine’s cell medieval illuminators have given us a unique understanding of the intimate space she inhabited. Bed, desk, quill and inkpot, everyday objects in themselves here transcend the mundane to become timeless symbols of her creativity.

NOTES

1. Readers please note that although I reference 29 illustrations (Figures) only 22 of these are shown in the article. The reason for this is the extraordinary expense of permissions to reproduce insisted upon by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereinafter quoted BnF) and the Bavarian State Library in Munich. All other archives kindly allowed me to publish the required illustrations without charge.
6. Ibid., p. 466.


15. While Christine is frequently portrayed in a blue gown with a white head-dress, her innumerable illustrators have portrayed her dressed in a variety of colors ranging from white (Fig. 9) to bright scarlet (Fig. 17).


22. The Sea Monster in the *Epistre d’Othea*, Ms. Harley 4431, f° 98v.


25. Christine de Pizan, Reno and Dulac (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 110.

26. Christine Reno states that “All but two of Christine’s ‘original’ mss are on parchment. As has been noted by various people, the parchment is often of very poor quality, but expertly patched.” Personal communication.


29. R. Vaughan, *John the Fearless. The Growth of Burgundian Power*, Rochester-New York, The Boydell Press, 2002, p. 235 and note 2 which shows that this item was taken from de Laborde, *Ducs de Bourgogne*, 1. 16, no. 63 = ACO B1543, f. 107. See also C. C. Willard, *op. cit.*, p. 170, which gives the date of this account as February 20 1406, and the “100 crowns” as “100 écus”.


34. This drawing is in a Paduan translation in Italian of Petrarch’s *De viris illustribus* now in the Hessische Landes und Hochschulbibliothek, Darmstadt. It is reproduced in P. Thornton, *The Renaissance Interior 1400-1600*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1991, p. 13, Fig. 4.


36. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, *op. cit.*, p. 6 (1.2.1).


*Christine de Pizan in her study*
38. Ibid., line 46.
39. Ibid., Ballade XI.
40. McLeod, op. cit., p. 120, Reno and Dulac, op. cit., p. 111.
42. E. J. Richards, Le Livre de la Cité des dames, op. cit., 1.1.1.
44. At the 6th International Colloque on Christine de Pizan, Paris, July 20-24, 2006, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski presented “Biblical (Old Testament) Subtexts in the Opening Scene of the Livre de la Cité des dames”. In this interesting paper she compared Christine’s posture of sleep and despair after reading Matheolus’s book, to Job and his comforters.
45. C. de Hamel, op. cit., p. 29.
47. Brussels, Ms. 9010, f° 226v.
49. Ibid., p. 641-668.
50. L. Paulet, Jacmart Pilavaine, miniaturiste du XV° siècle, Bruxelles, A. Decq; Amiens, Lenoel-Herouart, 1858.
51. A. Esch, op. cit., p. 663.
52. These three books were commissioned by Philippe de Croy whose arms are shown in the margins of the manuscript. His wife, Walburge de Meurs, owned Christine’s Livre de la Cité des Dames and her Livre des trois vertus.
53. As in the artist M. C. Escher’s “symmetry drawings” (1898-1972). Anke Esch used the term “escherienne” in describing the interiors of illuminations in this manuscript painted by the artist known as “Le Maître de l’Arbre des batailles”, first so called by Anne van Buren in 1983. A. Esch, op. cit., p. 655.
54. D. Thornton, op. cit., p. 31-38.

AUTHOR

SUSAN GROAG BELL

Senior Scholar, Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University.