Text and Tapestry: "The Lady and the Unicorn," Christine de Pizan and the le Vistes

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TEXT AND TAPESTRY: *The Lady and the Unicorn*,

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN AND THE LE VISTES

by

Shelley Williams

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Shelley Williams in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

Text and Tapestry: The Lady and the Unicorn,
Christine de Pizan and the le Vistes

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The luminous, famous and enigmatic The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries are timeless objects at the center of heated scholarly discussion. There are six tapestries, created circa 1480-1500 (figures 1 – 6), and were commissioned by the le Viste family of Lyon, whose heraldic arms appear in each tapestry. This paper seeks to connect the tapestries conceptually to contemporary courtly, feminine ideals, the image of woman in late fifteenth-century Paris, and most importantly to Christine de Pizan’s writings, particularly City of Ladies and The Treasury of the City of Ladies, both written in 1405. Through her texts, Christine de Pizan (1363 – 1434) created a noble, dignified image of women that may have influenced the way viewers were intended to perceive The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries. While recent scholarly studies have connected the tapestries to contemporary texts, there has not been a discussion regarding Christine de Pizan’s influential writings, their surrounding discourse, or the image of a woman as the visual embodiment of the le Viste family in connection to the tapestries. Specific passages in Christine’s texts resemble motifs, objects, and underlying messages in The Lady and the Unicorn. While Christine’s works may not have been the direct inspiration for the
tapestries, both are a part of the visual and textual make-up of the abstracted feminine ideals that were circulating in Paris and France at large in the fifteenth century. *The Lady and the Unicorn* may also have had a didactic purpose similar to Christine’s *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, displaying for the le Viste daughters through a visual medium the attributes of the ideal maiden. Exploring the cultural context in which *The Lady and the Unicorn* was created, specifically as it relates to women in society, the upper class, expectations for young maidens, visual and written moral messages for women and their artistic manifestations provides a new understanding of these exceptional tapestries.
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The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries are the most famous tapestries in the Western world (figures 1 – 6). Their luminosity, mysterious subject matter, and depiction of the unicorn have made them timeless objects of intense debate. There are six tapestries, created circa 1480-1500, and were commissioned by the le Viste family of Lyon, whose heraldic arms, the bend azure and three crescents argent, appear in each one. While the creative origin of the tapestries is debated, it is likely they were woven in Brussels and that the original designer was the Maître d’Anne de Bretagne. Questions concerning the origins of the tapestries, their subject matter, iconography, and sequence have been the primary issues of scholarly discussion. This paper seeks to add to the discourse by connecting the tapestries conceptually to contemporary courtly, feminine ideals, the image of woman in late fifteenth-century Paris, and most importantly to Christine de Pizan’s writings, particularly The City of Ladies and The Treasury of the City of Ladies, both written in 1405. Through her texts, Christine de Pizan (1363-1434) created a dignified image of women that may have influenced the way viewers were intended to perceive The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries. While recent scholarly studies have connected the tapestries to contemporary texts, there has not been a discussion regarding Christine de Pizan’s influential writings, their surrounding discourse, or the image of a woman as the visual embodiment of the

le Viste family in connection to the tapestries. This paper will argue that the le Vistes chose a woman to emblematize their family in a set of tapestries because the Lady portrays a powerful but non-aggressive image of nobility that would have benefited the le Vistes. It suggests that discussions about the noble woman’s position in society, as generated by the writings of Christine de Pizan, encouraged the image of aristocratic women as positive, powerful and peaceful, and these ideas are pictorially present in *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

The Lady in the tapestries depict the kind of courtly and virtuous woman championed in Christine’s writings, and reflected those values onto the le Viste family, whose armorial heraldry the Lady carries. While it would be impossible to know the extent of influence Christine de Pizan’s writings had on the le Viste family or on the tapestries’ creator, both express correlating ideas through text and image. Both are concerned with women existing in a secluded, ideal world and with social definitions of nobility and power, and both were part of the visual and cultural fabric of late fifteenth-century Parisian society.

The image of women in fifteenth-century France was complex and under scrutiny in politics, society, art, literature and even music. Christine de Pizan sought to redefine women in a positive way, empowering them through feminine virtues. Strong female personalities emerged along with Christine during this period, such as Joan of Arc, who revisaged the very image of France. The Lady in *The Lady and the Unicorn* is a visual manifestation of these changes, and in each tapestry the iconography and composition show these cultural shifts.

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4 I have chosen to refer to Christine de Pizan simply as ‘Christine’ following the precedent set by Charity Cannon Willard.
Specific passages in Christine’s texts resemble motifs, objects, and underlying messages in *The Lady and the Unicorn*. While Christine’s works may not have been the direct inspiration for the tapestries, both are a part of the visual and textual make-up of the abstracted feminine ideals that were circulating in Paris and France at large in the fifteenth century. *The Lady and the Unicorn* may also have had a didactic purpose similar to Christine’s *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, displaying for the le Viste daughters through a visual medium the attributes of the ideal maiden. Exploring the cultural context in which *The Lady and the Unicorn* was created, specifically as it relates to women in society, the upper class, expectations for young maidens, visual and written moral messages for women and their artistic manifestations provides a new understanding of these famous tapestries.

In each of the six *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, a Lady stands in a blue island amidst a field of vibrant red surrounded by wild and fantastical creatures. Two of the six tapestries show the Lady alone; in four of these a petite lady-in-waiting accompanies her. In each tapestry the lion and unicorn are constant companions and heraldic bearers. The tapestries are commonly referred to by each of the five senses, while the sixth tapestry, titled *A Mon Seul Désir*, derives its title from the woven inscription on the tent under which the Lady stands (figure 6).

The Lady plays an organ in *Hearing* and creates a garland of fragrant carnations in *Smell*. In *Taste* the Lady feeds a sweet to a parakeet perched on her gloved hand. In *Touch* the Lady’s face and dress are dissimilar from the other tapestries, and the animals are collared. Several scholars have discussed the possibility that this tapestry has a later creation date, or was part of a different series of tapestries, but in the end, *Touch* is always included in *The Lady and the Unicorn*. \(^5\) *Sight* also stands apart as the unicorn takes an active role in the composition, where it

rests in the Lady’s lap and gazes at the Lady. In *A Mon Seul Désir* the Lady replaces a necklace into a box held by her lady-in-waiting, standing beneath a blue tent with an enigmatic woven message.

There are over one hundred true-to-life plants depicted in the tapestries. Abandoning seasonal rhythms however, every flower and tree is in full and glorious bloom. An oak, holly, orange, and a pine tree are the only trees portrayed in the tapestries, balancing the composition in groups of two or four. Dispersed in the background or accompanying the Lady in her blue island is an exotic menagerie of rabbits, lambs, monkeys, birds, a young unicorn, dogs, and foxes. The myriad of plants scattered in the background gave rise to the term *mille fleurs*, used to describe tapestries with such backgrounds.

Medieval tapestries can be organized into three categories based on their content: historical/narrative, religious, or secular/allegorical. Narrative tapestries are rarely disguised; sometimes even cartoon-like captions inform the viewer ‘who is who.’ Likewise religious tapestries are discernible because of their well-known cast of characters. Of the secular/allegorical genre, *mille fleurs* tapestries are a subcategory. Typical examples are a tapestry of an early sixteenth-century date woven in Brussels, *The Noble Pastorale* (figure 7), and a Flemish *mille fleurs* tapestry (figure 8), late fifteenth century, with the arms of Jean de Daillon. Secular *mille fleurs* tapestries do not tell a story. They have simple subjects and actions, with pastoral scenes, courtly themes, and sometimes with romantic motifs; they are always decorative. Often they are allegorical in nature. *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries are part of this secular genre.

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6 It is interesting to note that orange trees were recently introduced to France and were extremely rare in the late fifteenth century, adding to the exoticism created through the leopard, lion, ape and parrot. M. Dayras, “Réflexions sur les Origines de la Tenture de *La Dame à la Licorne*,“ in *Actes du Quatre-Vingt-Huitième Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes*, (Paris: Clermont-Ferrand, 1963, 1965), 339.
It is believed Jean le Viste IV (1432-1500) was the original patron, and upon his death his daughter, Claude, inherited the tapestries. Through successive marriages and inheritances, the tapestries were hung in the Château Boussac, Creuse, in the Limousin region of France. It was not until the efforts of Prosper Mérimée in 1841 and George Sand’s publications in 1847 that the tapestries were brought to the world’s attention. They were subsequently purchased by the French government, and were eventually given to the Musée National du Moyen Âge at the Hôtel Cluny in Paris in 1882. Since then the tapestries have been discussed, fictionalized, argued over, misunderstood, and passionately debated by scholars the world over.

However dissimilar in composition, the tapestries all share a corresponding style and were most likely part of the same original set. They should be considered together, and were created within the same time frame, 1480-1500. Dating methods related to the tapestries often rely on stylistic evidence in the ladies’ fashion, such as the blue silk moiré of the Lady’s dress in Sight. The tapestries also stylistically resemble tapestries dated at the end of the fifteenth century.

Any contemporary written documents about The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries have been lost. Only the visual evidence remains, which has sparked centuries of imaginative speculation and storytelling, from the romantic tales of the Turkish Prince Zizim and his French

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10 Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, Lady and the Unicorn, 68-69.
ladylove circulated in the nineteenth century, to Tracy Chevalier’s novel of 2003.\(^{12}\) Scholars have been equally intrigued with the tapestries, with the earliest scholarship appearing in 1882, sparked by their first appearance to a public audience.\(^{13}\)

A. Kendrick argued that *The Lady and the Unicorn* depict the five senses in his groundbreaking article published in 1921.\(^{14}\) This has become the most common interpretation of the tapestries since. The five senses theory connects *The Lady and the Unicorn* to comparable images from the medieval period. His arguments have passed the test of time, and no other theory has been able to successfully discredit Kendrick’s. The five senses was a common theme in medieval art, particularly in etches, stained glass, and illuminated manuscripts. The earliest examples stem from the Greek tradition that used animals to embody the senses, and later by men touching the appropriate body part for each sense, as can be seen in the Fuller Brooch from the ninth century (figure 23). Carl Nordenfalk discusses the varying ways the five senses were illustrated visually in medieval art, and argued that a shift occurred circa 1500, in which “…the rule is that the Five Senses should be represented as women.”\(^{15}\) He believes this change occurred because in contemporary literature similar “mental concepts” or allegorical figures were represented as women, like Liberty and Virtue.\(^{16}\) *The Lady and the Unicorn* he argues provide the “earliest instance of the Senses depicted as women.”\(^{17}\) Because the Lady in the tapestries is an allegorical metaphor of the five senses, the tapestries are appropriate for the era, place and style in which they were woven. What makes the Lady in the tapestries unique is her


\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
position as the visual representative of the le Viste family through their omnipresent heraldic arms and her singularity in each composition, not her role in symbolizing the five senses. The Lady is worthy of deeper inspection because she represents more than simply the five senses, she is an idealized vision of femininity connecting to philosophical and cultural ideas surrounding the position of women in fifteenth-century Paris, as will be argued later.

Recent speculations have challenged Kendrick’s five senses theory. In 1997, Kristina Gourlay interpreted the tapestries as an allegory for courtship and marriage.\textsuperscript{18} While giving mention to the five senses allegory, she believes it does not allow for the “complexity of medieval symbolism and for the fact that there may well have been additional tapestries.”\textsuperscript{19} She renames the tapestries with titles more appropriate for her interpretation, replacing *Taste* with *Pursuit*, *Hearing* with *Harmony*, *Smell* with *Recognition*, *Sight* with *Capitulation*, *Touch* with *Capture*, and *A Mon Seul Désir* with *Resolution*. According to medieval folklore, mythology, literature and art, the unicorn embodied several ideas including a lover-bridegroom, chastity, the moon, the ocean, and as an allegory of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{20} Gourlay’s position relies on the unicorn playing the role of the lover bridegroom. In the tapestries, however, the unicorn abandons his post as heraldic bearer only in *Sight*, which will be argued later in this paper could be exhibiting a different idea. Besides *Sight*, the unicorn’s function does not appear to be anything more than heraldic in *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

Another issue with Gourlay’s argument lies in tapestry genres. Tapestries with courtly love as subjects or that include romantic themes typically involve both male and female

\textsuperscript{18} Kristina Gourlay, “*La Dame à la Licorne: a Reinterpretation,*” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 139 (1997): 47 – 72.
\textsuperscript{19} Gourlay, “*La Dame à la Licorne:* A Reinterpretation,” 68. However, Kendrick himself said in the same article in which he argued for the five senses theory: “I am therefore happy to think that the suggestions I have to make does not altogether solve the mystery which surrounds these beautiful panels,” leaving the door open to other interpretations. Ibid. Kendrick, 664.
\textsuperscript{20} Margaret Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), 68-73. See also Elmer G. Suhr, “An Interpretation of the Unicorn” *Folklore* 75 (1964) 91-109.
characters in activities associated with romance, such as pleasuring in gardens of love, or hunting scenes. Such tapestries do not exhibit amorous affairs in disguised ways, but are commonly overt. This is seen in La Tenture de la Vie Seigneuriale series, Flemish tapestries circa 1525, which show scenes of courtly life and love (figures 9-11). Elegant women and richly dressed noblemen enjoy each other’s company amidst a lovely and secluded garden of love. In one of these is a couple about to embrace (figure 11). The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries, however, do not have scenes with men present, or scenes readily associated with love. The subject matter does not support a theory arguing for a romantic theme.

Gourlay was not the first scholar to assert the tapestries were possibly created as a wedding gift. As Helmut Nickel wrote fifteen years earlier, “practically every bride who married into the le Viste family between 1480 and 1515 has been suggested as the fortunate first owner.” No conclusive documentation has come forth to prove the tapestries were commissioned to celebrate a marriage. The primary problem with this conjecture is that it was customary to present both the bride’s and the groom’s family arms in the composition of a work of art. It was also conventional to include a man and a woman as subject matter in tapestries meant as wedding gifts, signaling the union of the two families. Tapestry weavers had several cartoons from which a patron could choose a design that could be adapted to include a specific coat of arms, which was then painted onto a canvas and used as the design for the tapestry. In The Lady and the Unicorn only the le Viste family arms and only women appear in the compositions, so they do not follow traditional practices for tapestries celebrating a wedding. The central role the le Viste’s arms play in The Lady and the Unicorn may be an indicator that

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21 See for example, Maria Lanckoronska, Wandteppiche für eine Fürstin (Frankfurt: Scheffler, 1965).
their original cartoon may have been a dramatically altered version of an existing cartoon, or perhaps been unique to the le Viste commission.

Nordenfalk reasoned: “There is no known occasion in his [Jean le Viste IV] life with which the tapestries could be connected,” meaning there was no wedding or other appropriate celebration that occurred at this time in his life to merit commissioning such tapestries. Instead, I would argue, the tapestries were made to celebrate the le Viste family, their earned wealth, and their rising position in society. The Lady and the Unicorn is a statement of their departure from the middle class and their arrival into the upper class. These marvelous tapestries present the message that the le Vistes should be considered among the noblesse de robe because not only do they have armorial heraldry, but also can afford to have a princely set of tapestries to emblazon in their own home. From the great size, expensive material, and the scenes they depict, The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries present a grandiose message of wealth.

Four generations before Jean le Viste IV, his great grandfather Barthélemy le Viste was a clothier in Lyon. It was his fortune that allowed his sons to study law and eventually move to Paris, where they found great success. The family’s wealth has roots in the textile industry, and Jean le Viste’s decision to celebrate the family’s increased affluence and power through sumptuous weavings is perhaps meaningful and adds to their significance to the family.

**The Le Viste Family**

Jean le Viste IV (1432 – 1500) was a successful lawyer, and at midlife secured a place in the Parisian Parliament. Of all the men in the le Viste family before him, Jean IV rose to the

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25 Souchal, Masterpieces of Tapestry, 106.
26 Elisabeth Delahaye, The Lady and the Unicorn, 89.
highest political position, earned the greatest wealth, and had hopes of becoming ennobled.27

The family gained great wealth and prominence through royal connections and their deft ability in law. According to land records, the le Viste family owned buildings in Paris, tracts of rural property, and vineyards.28 Despite the family’s wealth, they were not of noble or royal blood, which vexed this family of self-made men.29 Jean IV strove to appear as nobility of the blood however, as is evident in the family’s invented heraldry.

In the medieval knightly tradition, the king issued family arms. In fact, in the late Middle Ages, “arms [were] the criterion of nobility.”30 The le Viste arms, three crescents argent and gules, were not granted by the king. This was not an unusual practice for wealthy families from non-aristocratic bloodlines desiring to feign the outward manifestations of nobility. The le Viste heraldry is prominent in every tapestry in the direct sight of the viewer, and not relegated to a corner or an embroidered patch, as is the case with many other contemporary tapestries.31 The le Vistes also had their heraldry throughout their home at Château d’Arcy near Lyon, above fireplaces, doorways, and at the entrance. The arms appeared on a seal of Jean le Viste in 1446, and later on his tomb.32 Such a prolific and prominent display of their arms denotes a

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29 Nickel, “About the Sequence of the Tapestries in The Hunt of the Unicorn and The Lady with the Unicorn,” 12-13.
31 Nordenfalk, “Qui a Commande les Tapisseries Dites de “La Dame a la Licorne?”, 54. See tapestry IX of the St. Etienne series, ca. 1500 (figure 12). Here the family’s heraldry is discretely placed on the right atop a banner.
desire to have the same status as those of established noble families, whose heraldry was awarded by the king.

The colors and choice of symbols in the le Viste’s arms had significance that would have been understood by contemporary onlookers. Désirée Koslin described their meaning as having “auspicious symbolic values of long standing.” Medieval heraldic symbolism was commonly recognized: the argent stood for purity and chastity, gules for humanity and the blood of martyrs, azure for eternal truth and the heavenly divine.

The standard bearers also symbolize aspects of the le Viste family. The lion refers to their Lyonnaise heritage, and the unicorn, the fastest mythological creature, could be a pun on vite, or ‘fast’ in Old French. Of the three standard bearers, the two animals stand for the le Vistes in a concrete fashion, and the Lady in a conceptual dimension. She is an idealized vision of courtliness, wealth, accomplishment and aristocracy that the le Vistes wished to have visually associated with them.

Tapestries as a late medieval artistic medium were carriers and creators of French aristocratic ideals in a way no other art form was. They hung on walls in domestic settings, a position paintings had not acquired at this time, and were viewed on a daily basis by the occupants. Tapestries were larger than paintings, and were more expensive. The English King Henry VIII, for example, spent £1500 in 1528 for a ten piece Story of David, whereas he paid Hans Holbien £30 per annum as the official painter of the King. Tapestries were necessary to visually reinforce the king’s wealth and power to all viewers. Textiles were considered

34 Koslin, pg. 235.
35 Nickel, “About the Sequence of the Tapestries in “The Hunt of the Unicorn” and “The Lady with the Unicorn,” 12.
36 Frances Lennard and Maria Hayward, Tapestry Conservation; Principles and Practice (Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006), 4.
“principle decoration” in royal courts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They were portable wealth, moving with the court throughout the year. They also served a practical purpose to keep the biting cold of stonewalls out of a room.

The message of fabulous wealth in The Lady and the Unicorn would not have been lost on the medieval viewer, and neither would the subject matter or exquisite details. Koslin wrote concerning the medieval viewer and tapestries: “An informed medieval viewer could...like the student of reception theory today, search understated details for clues involving inscriptions, gestures, ornament details, facial features, and so on, for...more subtle messages.” Considering even the smallest details in tapestries, therefore, is a worthwhile venture because their original audience would have noticed them.

In about 1475, at the age of 43, Jean IV married Geneviève de Nanterre. The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries were almost certainly commissioned at a later date, and were not created to celebrate this marriage. Geneviève was from an established noble family with a long lineage of landed aristocratic blood, and therefore a favorable match for Jean IV. Jean’s only heirs were three daughters from this union: Claude, Jeanne and Geneviève. Without hope of a male successor, his daughters were the key to his legacy. Their advantageous marriages and importance as representatives of the family were absolutely vital. They were in this way like the Lady in the Lady and the Unicorn, single female bearers of the le Viste family and fortune.

Claude’s personal history is fairly well known. She was married twice, first to Geoffrey de Balzac who died in 1510, and then to Jean de Chabannes, Seigneur de Vandesse in 1513. Jean de Chabannes died in 1524, and Claude died before 1544. It is believed Claude inherited all of

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37 Lennard, Tapestry Conservation, 20.
Jean IV’s possessions and property, including *The Lady and the Unicorn*. The second daughter, Jeanne, was married to Thibault Baillet at an uncertain date, and gave birth to two sons. Unfortunately, Jeanne and her two sons died young, and little is known of her life. The life of the third daughter, Geneviève, is a complete mystery. She may have died young, or perhaps her marriage and death dates were mysteriously unrecorded.

According to the dates that are certain, it is plausible Jean le Viste commissioned and owned the tapestries while his three daughters were young and unwed. The single, maidenly and virtuous women woven into *The Lady and the Unicorn* may have been an appropriate subject matter and possibly even meaningful considering the immediate audience of the le Viste daughters. Perhaps the Lady in the tapestries is not only a worthy visual emissary of the le Vistes, but also a pictorial example to the young le Viste women, upon whom ambitious Jean IV rested his inheritance. Whatever the level of participation on the part of Jean IV in the composition of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, the choice of a woman to embody the family’s arms may have been premeditated considering his own family and ambitions.

**Christine de Pizan**

Christine de Pizan (1363–c. 1434) (figure 13) was a visionary writer whose cultural and historical impact and feminist writings have been the focus of intense scholarly interest in the past twenty years. During her lifetime, she was one of the most famous and popular authors in Western Europe. She enjoyed the support of Jean Gerson, the influential chancellor of the
University of Paris, and had literary and philosophical discussions with intellectual luminaries such as Jean de Montreuil, Pierre and Gontier Col.\textsuperscript{42} Counted among her illustrious patrons were none other than King Richard II of England, Charles VI of France, John, Duke of Berry, Philip the Bold, John the Fearless, Louis of Orleans and his wife, Valentina Visconti, Charles VI and his wife, Isabella of Bavaria.\textsuperscript{43}

She wrote hundreds of poems, ballads, letters, treatises, books and essays. The genres and subjects of her works spanned biography, allegorical fiction, nonfiction, political commentary, religious discourses and even ventured into what is now termed “self help.” In the turbulent and dangerous socio-political climate of the early fifteenth century, Christine endeavored to be a voice of reason, a guiding light to the French, and a rallying patriotic voice. She advocated peace and was intensely involved in politics. King Charles V and Joan of Arc became symbols of French might and potential in her biographies, written when war with the English was intolerable. Christine endeavored to guide the leading monarchy in France and abroad through books written for specific leaders, such as \textit{Le Livre de Fais d'armes et de la chevalrie} written for the Dauphin, Louis of Guyenne circa 1405.\textsuperscript{44}

Christine’s works were publicized in her lifetime by two methods. One as hand-copied manuscripts on vellum, parchment or paper copied by scribes in ‘scriptoria.’\textsuperscript{45} These copies were costly, and would have been found in the libraries of the wealthy. The second method was


\textsuperscript{43} Christine de Pizan, Earl Jeffrey Richards, trans., \textit{The Book of the City of Ladies} (New York: Persea Books, 1998), xxvi.

\textsuperscript{44} Kate Langdon Forhan, “Reflecting Heroes: Christine de Pizan and the Mirror Tradition,” in Margarete Zimmerman and Dina De Rentis, ed., \textit{The City of Scholars} (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1994) 193.

through verbal communication, as part of “public readings as a form of entertainment, instruction, and mealtime accompaniment.”46 A third, less expensive method appeared at the end of the fifteenth century with the invention of the printing press. Christine’s books were first published in 1475-6 by the Englishman William Caxton, as one of the first books to be produced in his printing press in Westminster and Bruges.47 By the end of the fifteenth century, Christine’s works existed in hundreds of printed books and illuminated manuscripts throughout libraries in Europe. Today, extant manuscripts of her work are written in English, French and Portuguese, indicative of her international fame.

Of top priority to Christine were women’s issues. She was immersed in her efforts to bring attention to women’s social plights and education. Her most famous writings concerning women were The Book of the City of Ladies and The Treasury of the City of Ladies. The City of Ladies was completed in 1405 and is framed as an allegorical discussion between Christine and female personifications of Reason, Rectitude and Justice, who instruct her to build a city for the most worthy ladies of the past, present and future. The book is written as a conversation; Christine asks questions answered by her holy guides. It is broken into three parts, each a discourse between Christine and one of the allegorical goddesses. Different parts of their conceptual city are completed with the end of each section of the book.

With each foundational stone laid for the City, an age-old lie concerning women is undone and a truth told in its place, as illustrated in a manuscript illumination of Christine and the three virtues building the City of Ladies (figure 14). The text opens with a question posed by Christine, offered in the form of prayer and introspection:

“…how it happened that so many different men – and learned men among them – have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writing so many

46 Treasury of the City of Ladies, 248.
47 Ibid., 248.
devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behavior…To the best of my knowledge, no matter how long I confronted or dissected the problem, I could not see or realize how their claims could be true when compared to the natural behavior and character of women.”

Christine concludes these “learned men” are erroneous, and she endeavors to combat their hostile accusations with her own writings. Stories of righteous and valiant women are told as both an example to Christine’s readers and as a testament against the frailties and wickedness of women extolled in contemporary and historical literature. Both pagan and Christian women are discussed; saints, goddesses and warrior Amazons are equally considered because of their strength and worthiness as women. When the City is completed, the virtuous women heroized in her stories are welcomed as permanent citizens in the City of Ladies.

Justice tells Christine that to enter will be the “honor and prerogative among all other women, as well as among the most excellent women.” The City is described by Reason as “extremely beautiful, without equal, and of perpetual duration in the world.” It is a metaphysical place where women are celebrated and honored, an imaginary construct for noble women of any age and social standing to enjoy equality and fair treatment.

Because Christine is guided by Reason, Rectitude and Justice, no man or army can destroy the City’s beautiful fortifications. The virtues instruct Christine: “Following our plan, you will set the foundations deep to last all the longer, and then you will raise the walls so high that they will not fear anyone.” Rectitude calls The City of Ladies a “New Kingdom of Femininity.” The virtues contrast the City of Ladies with Troy, which was built by King Tros with three pagan guides: Apollo, Minerva and Neptune. Troy was a masculine construct,
temporal in its foundation and built upon worldly principles, whereas Christine’s city will last forever because of the feminine virtues that guided its building.

After a lengthy discussion of honorable women throughout the history of man and myth, Christine urges her readers to learn from their example. She writes: “My ladies, see how these men accuse you of so many vices in everything. Make liars of them all by showing forth your virtue, and prove their attacks false by acting well, so that you can say with the Psalmist, “the vices of the evil will fall on their heads.”\footnote{City of Ladies, 258.} She concludes the book with a plea and a hope for her readers, ringing like a prayer: “And so may it please you, my most respectful ladies, to cultivate virtue, to flee vice, to increase and multiply our City, and to rejoice and act well.”\footnote{City of Ladies, 257.}

A companion to The City of Ladies, Christine de Pizan’s The Treasury of the City of Ladies was a guidebook to ladies on how to become worthy to enter the City. It is addressed primarily to women of high rank, but Christine wrote with an intended audience of all women. The first and longest part of the book addresses princesses and queens, followed by a chapter for women in the court and women whose husbands were land-holding, with subsequent sections for women of the lower classes in descending order, ending the book with a warning to prostitutes.

The Treasury of the City of Ladies begins in a similar fashion to The City of Ladies; Christine is again visited by the Three Virtues. She is awakened in her bed, chided for resting, and urged to write another tome for women. However, this text is not a series of discussions between Christine and Reason, Rectitude and Justice like City of Ladies. This text is entirely different as it offers direct, practical advice from Christine to her readers. Never before had a book been written by a woman for women concerning proper conduct in a woman’s adult life.\footnote{Treasury of the City of Ladies, 36.} This
necessarily makes *The Treasury of the City of Ladies* an extraordinary historical text. Its impact was tremendous, especially in the aristocratic levels of society.

Christine admonishes noblewomen to show their worth through virtues, to maintain and increase their honor through displays of rationality, wisdom and discrete conduct. Nearly every aspect of women’s lives are discussed in *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, from daily routines, interactions with men, proper education, fashion, pastimes, legal matters, giving birth and motherhood. What is especially exceptional is her advice to widows, governesses, elderly women, wives of artisans and merchants, and even prostitutes; Christine does not ignore the ‘outskirts’ of female society. In the end, Christine believes all women can influence her surroundings through virtuous conduct. Concerning Christine’s perfect woman, she wrote: “Representing all noble virtues herself, through her gifts she will encourage nobility and high standards in others.”

According to Christine’s writings, it was important to be a virtuous and wise woman not only to improve her own life and the lives of those around her, but also because the highest reward of entering the Kingdom of Heaven after death could only be obtained through perfect Christian conduct. For example, Christine champions chastity and goodness, which she believes are important qualities not only because it endeared husbands to their wives, but brought women closer to God. Biblical Rebecca was an example of this, of whom Christine wrote: “Yet through [Rebecca’s] chastity and goodness, this Lady obtained an even greater boon than the love of her husband, that is, the grace and love of God.” Christine extolled that through a woman’s good virtues, she is loved and blessed by God.

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56 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 116.
57 *City of Ladies*, 157.
Christine’s City of Ladies was never intended to replace Christ’s Kingdom of Heaven, rather, it was a conceptual and spiritual framework outside the Christian structure. Christine finishes *The Treasury of the City of Ladies* expressing the hope her writings will influence generations to come, and a petition for her own soul: “Seen and heard by many valiant ladies and women of authority, both at the present time and in times to come, they will pray to God on behalf of their faithful servant, Christine, wishing that her life in this world had been at the same time as theirs so that they might have known her.”

Upon first introduction to Christine’s *City of Ladies*, the modern reader may believe men are forever excluded from the City. A recent argument made by Earl Jeffrey Richards discredits this idea, and believes instead that Christine uses a woman as an emblem of all mankind. He wrote:

“Christine will use allegory to avoid the dangers of locking men out and of locking women in. Christine radically questions earlier misogynist representations of women by having women represent all humanity allegorically. Thanks to the norms of medieval *allegoresis*, Christine can situate the history of women within an anagogical perspective that transcends gender itself.”

He later concluded: “Using the female to allegorize the human constitutes nothing less than a stunning innovation on Christine’s part.”

Christine was aware her largest audience would consist of literate women of the upper classes, but she was concerned with women of all social ranks. In fact, by the end of the fifteenth century, Christine’s audience expanded and reached into many different parts of society. Eighteen or nineteen manuscripts are extant today of *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*, with three printed editions in French and Portuguese. There is also a collection of manuscripts written on

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59 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 224.
60 Earl Jeffrey Richards, “Christine de Pizan and Sacred History,” 28.
61 Ibid., 29.
paper rather than vellum. Regarding this last group of manuscripts, Charity Cannon Willard wrote:

“In spite of their doubtful quality as art objects, these copies call attention to the appeal of Christine’s books to non-aristocratic readers, perhaps the literate wives and daughters of merchants or public officials, who would soon form an important audience for printed books. Some of these manuscripts show traces of the vicissitudes of domestic life; for instance, one in the Arsenal Library in Paris (Ms. 3356) has drawings scribbled on the end papers by some long-forgotten child. Such manuscripts bear witness to the observation of the late Professor C. E. Pickford that, as the fifteenth century progressed, the reading public was no longer primarily aristocratic, but included members of a better-educated middle class, and, to an increasing extent, women.”

Christine’s writings had a far-reaching influence in fifteenth-century French society and beyond. She was well respected as a writer, and her ideas were discussed among the highest-ranking nobility, including kings and queens. These discussions disseminated down the social ranks throughout the century until her works were familiar and part of the popular canon, “enmeshed in a complex cultural and political world.” The educated, informed viewer would have recognized the symbols and allegories used by Christine de Pizan in art and literature.

Christine weaves an intangible tapestry in *The City of Ladies* and *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*; she designs through continuous threads of historical female examples a rich and timeless composition. She creates a conceptual construct of the perfect woman and describes how she should relate to her surroundings. Through an allegorical paradigm, Christine has crafted a work of art for and by women. Colorful, complex, and well-constructed, Christine de Pizan’s literary constructions are truly masterpieces.

When comparing Christine’s *City of Ladies* to *The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, certain thematic correlations become apparent. They share specific iconography, composition and female representations. In both text and tapestry, women are the only heroines. Ladies exist

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62 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 44.
eternally in a protected world, visually and conceptually separate from men. Both employ the medieval allegorical mode in which women embody larger ideas, whether they are Reason, Justice or the five senses.

When Christine writes about a female example in The City of Ladies, she considers one woman at a time, referring to her by name. Christine uses singular instances of women doing either great or ordinary deeds to show their nobility of soul and being. She also typically focuses on a single attribute, action or instance that best describes the virtue she is exemplifying, similar to The Lady and the Unicorn, which also only focuses on one woman and one action in each composition. This simplicity of subject matter is common in mille fleurs tapestries, however in most tapestry series of this genre, the woman’s action is directly connected to a man’s activity. Whether she is bathing, falconing, pressing wine, or shearing a sheep, her deed is interacting in some way with masculine action. For example, The Noble Pastorale (figure 7) depicts women performing a single procedure, shearing sheep or tending to wool, in connection to a shepherd, who is central in the composition. The Lady and the Unicorn is different because the women in each tapestry are wholly disassociated from masculine activity. Several scholars have tried to link the female actions in The Lady and the Unicorn to a male centered theme, such as courtship, marriage, love affairs, or hunting, which require the activating force to be masculine. However, none of these studies have been convincing; the iconography does not easily allow such a connection.

Christine’s women are often reacting against a masculine perogative, such as war, but her deeds are considered her own. Her version of Penelope’s story for example, is opposite of Homer’s. Homer’s epic revolves around the antics of Ulysses and his crew, whose adventures take them far and wide in the ancient world. Penelope is a silent figure in the background, obediently and patiently waiting twenty years for Ulysses’ return. Her role is hardly recognized.
until the end, only when she is part of the spectacular male action of the archery competition and her husband’s triumphant return. In Christine’s retelling in The City of Ladies however, Penelope’s decisions and virtuous patience are the focus of the story. She has inverted Homer’s tale, making the woman’s virtuous behavior the heroic reaction to the prolonged absence of her husband. Christine writes of Penelope:

“One finds, in various writings, many chaste, good, and honest women among pagan ladies. Penelope, wife of Prince Ulysses, was a most virtuous Lady, and among her many fine traits, she was much praised for the virtue of chastity. Many histories mention her at great length, for during the ten years her husband spent at the siege of Troy, this Lady conducted herself most wisely, and even though she was propositioned by many kings and princes on account of her outstanding beauty, she did not listen or pay attention to a single one of them. She was wise, prudent, and devoted to the gods and to living virtuously. Even after the destruction of Troy she still had to wait another ten years for her husband. It was thought that he had perished at sea, where he had suffered many misfortunes. On his return, Ulysses found her besieged by a king seeking to marry her because of her great chastity and goodness. Her husband arrived disguised as a pilgrim and inquired after her, and he was very happy with the good reports he heard and took great joy in his son Telemachus whom he had left as a little child and whom he found grown up.”

Christine’s retelling is not concerned with regaling Ulysses’ adventures, but the virtue of the woman he left behind. Penelope’s chastity is the product of her own virtuous soul. In both Christine’s City of Ladies and The Lady and the Unicorn, the heroines act of their own will and are secure in their femininity.

As mentioned earlier, Christine’s City of Ladies does not exclude men, but rather transcends gender, holding women as a symbol for all humankind. Comparably The Lady and the Unicorn does not ostracize men. The tapestries are not exclusive of the male gaze, they were in fact commissioned by a man in part to display his own wealth and social prominence. However, the compositions in both The City of Ladies and The Lady and the Unicorn use only women to illustrate their points.

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64 City of Ladies, 158.
The topography is completely different in Christine’s *City of Ladies* and *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Christine’s is a city; the concluding image is an urban vision. Rather than a bustling metropolis teeming with activity and life, *The Lady and the Unicorn* is set in a hushed, secluded garden. Such gardens are typical scenes for romantic trysts, pastorals or as the Garden of Eden, and are the defining characteristic of the *mille fleurs* genre. However, the gardens in *The Lady and the Unicorn* may not have had any romantic or pastoral connotations: instead I would argue they are like Christine’s City with a common function to provide a safe haven for virtuous women. As Reason explains to Christine her task, she says:

“There is another greater and even more special reason for our coming which you will learn from our speeches: in fact we have come to vanquish from the world the same error into which you had fallen, so that from now on, ladies and all valiant women may have refuge and defense against the various assailants, those ladies who have been abandoned for so long, exposed like a field without a surrounding hedge, without finding a champion to afford them an adequate defense, notwithstanding those noble men who are required by order of law to protect them, who by negligence and apathy have allowed them to be mistreated.”

Christine likens an unprotected, vulnerable field to the state of women throughout history, open to the criticism of cruel tongues and “men inclined to slander women without reason.” When the walled City is complete, it has created an opposite vision from the vast field without a hedge described earlier. The City is “…the refuge for you all, that is, for virtuous women, but also the defense and guard against your enemies and assailants, if you guard it well. For you can see that the substance with which it is made is entirely of virtue, so resplendent that you may see yourselves mirrored in it.”

The gardens in *The Lady and the Unicorn* are not scenes for romance, but impenetrable islands of seclusion for women alone. The actual ground the Lady stands on is a circular,

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65 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 237.
67 *City of Ladies*, 160.
68 *City of Ladies*, 254.
enclosed space, protected from the red “field” of the background. It is like a *hortus conclusus*, “the substance with which it is made is entirely of virtue.” Garden art historian Rob de Wit described such gardens this way:

“Gardens are by definition havens of peace and quiet, order and pleasure in a chaotic and hostile world. Places where nature is at once excluded and brought into view in water and coolness, fertile ground and a fine prospect. At times these two worlds – that of the ‘unworldly’ ideal and that of the real landscape – come together, as in the enclosed garden, the *hortus conclusus.*”

The gardens in *The Lady and the Unicorn* are protected havens for virtuous women, places for ideals to intersect with daily life. Conceptually these two spaces, the City and the garden, function in the same capacity to protect women from men’s slander and their own vice – the “open field.”

Another tapestry contemporary to *The Lady and the Unicorn, Penelope at her Loom* (figure 15), is so akin in style to *The Lady and the Unicorn* that there is little doubt they were produced in the same workshop, likely with cartoons by the Maître d’Anne de Bretagne. It is a fragment from *The Story of Penelope and the Story of the Cimbri Women*, French or Franco-Flemish (c. 1480-83), from the series *The Stories of Virtuous Women* of which only fragments remain. These tapestries were commissioned by Ferry de Clugny, the Bishop of Tournai. The series’ subject matter was devoted to the stories of virtuous women, which may have included Suzanne, Judith, the women of Sparta, Hippo the Athenian, and Lucrèce. The choice of heroines, like Penelope, in these tapestries and in Christine de Pizan’s works overlapped and showed an interest in celebrating Biblical and mythological women.

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71 Marthe Crick-Kuntziger, “Un Chef-d’Oeuvre Inconnu du Maître de la Dame a la Licorne,” 3.
It is likely *The Stories of Virtuous Women* were created in the same workshop contemporaneously with *The Lady and the Unicorn*. It is possible that the le Viste family had seen these works, their cartoons, sketches or designs, and Jean IV desired a set featuring single, noble women to present the family arms. The *Penelope* fragment also points to the possibility that *The Lady and the Unicorn* may not have been unique in their subject matter and style. Tapestries whose subjects were dignified noblewomen may have been in vogue as a result of the intellectual interest in women’s social position in the humanistic circles of the educated class, who would have been the patrons for such tapestries and simultaneously readers of Christine de Pizan. An interesting connection may be made between Anne de Bretagne, the patron of the Maître d’Anne de Bretagne, and Christine de Pizan. Anne de Bretagne was an early supporter of Christine, and several printed editions of Christine’s works were dedicated to her. This points to the possibility that the Maître d’Anne de Bretagne may have been aware of Christine’s writings and textual constructs in a direct way through his/her patron, and incorporated Christian imagery in his cartoons, as I argue are present in *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

There may have also been another set of tapestries analogous to *The Lady and the Unicorn*, which Marie-Élisabeth Bruel argued were in fact the same tapestries. She cites an inventory of the Château Montaigu-le Blin from 1595, in which tapestries were described as having “a red background, with arms of three crescents, unicorns and Sibyls.” However, there is not enough evidence to support her argument; Bruel does not cite the original inventory from which she draws her conclusions. She relies on

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74 E. Bruel, “Les Tapisseries de La Dame à la Licorne, une Représentation des Vertus Allégoriques du Roman de la Rose.”
the work of P. Verlet et F. Salet done nearly fifty years ago, in which they also discuss the mysterious inventory without sufficient documentation, leaving the reader wondering where this inventory was found and if it is a reliable historical document.75 Without proof of this primary document’s authenticity, BrueL’s ideas cannot be properly founded. Henry Martin also published satisfactory evidence of the tapestries’ migration to Boussac that does not include a sojourn in Montaigu-le Blin.76 If such tapestries existed, the Montaigu-le Blin series were likely a different set, perhaps also commissioned by the le Vistes.77 This could possibly show that The Lady and the Unicorn were not the only set of tapestries patroned by the le Vistes with parallel subject matter.

There is evidence that Christine de Pizan’s writings were used as direct inspiration for tapestries commissioned by nobility. At the death of Henry VIII of England in 1547, an inventory was made of his many belongings, not the least of which were tapestries. In the inventories, a series of tapestries titled Citie of Ladies was included that appeared to be visual depictions of Christine’s The Book of the City of Ladies, which were inherited by Queen Elizabeth I.78 A recent book written by Susan Bell traces possible tapestries whose subjects were based on Christine de Pizan’s writings, and in it she pursuasively argues that The City of Ladies was a popular subject matter for tapestries well in to the Renaissance.79 None of these tapestry series survive; however, there is evidence from various inventories that other monarchs owned comparable sets. The aristocracy commissioned tapestries whose subjects were women performing virtuous actions or deeds, resembling the women in Christine de Pizan’s City of

75 F. Salet and P. Verlet, La Dame à la Licorne, 43.
77 Erlande-Brandenburg, Lady and the Unicorn, 67-68.
79 Bell, The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan’s Renaissance Legacy, 149-164.
Ladies. *The Lady and the Unicorn* may have been a part of this trend, tailored to fit the needs of the le Vistes.

Christine de Pizan’s literary works were not only written to elevate the image of women, but also to respond to questions regarding what constituted nobility. The fifteenth century in France was full of social upheaval, political turmoil and rivalry. There was a growing bourgeoisie and middle class, which undermined established definitions of nobility and aristocracy. Christine endeavored to define nobility in new terms, which not only included women, but held them as an example. As Earl Jeffrey Richards wrote, “Christine has taken over the traditional term ‘lady’ and invested it with an innovative significance; ‘lady’ for Christine refers to the nobility of the soul rather than the nobility of the blood.”  

Nobility of the soul does not have gender boundaries. Christine, however, chose a woman to illustrate nobility of the soul, and so did the le Vistes.

The le Vistes were aware of the images and vestiges that constituted noble aristocracy, and the Lady in the tapestries was that embodiment. She is the epitome of the medieval aristocratic woman. The le Viste family would have been aware of Christine de Pizan’s writings and the philosophical discussions they sparked and carried into the late fifteenth century, and the visual depictions of those values. By choosing to represent the family through the arms carried by the lion and unicorn with a woman as the central figure, the le Vistes were instilling in their viewers their own ideas of aristocracy and nobility, which visually resembled conceptual ideas in the writings of Christine de Pizan. It is possible also that these tapestries had a specific significance as their original audience potentially included three young women of the upper class, and that *The Lady and the Unicorn* carried moral messages for the le Viste daughters.

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80 *City of Ladies*, xxx.
Beyond the possible le Viste connection to Christine de Pizan, educated viewers of The Lady and the Unicorn may have made connections between the tapestries and text long after Jean IV died and Claude inherited the tapestries. Christine’s writings did not disappear from the popular canon until the late sixteenth century. Written descriptions and constructs in The City of Ladies and The Treasury of the City of Ladies resemble visual aspects in The Lady and the Unicorn, and will be discussed below.

**THE LADY**

What has made the Lady and the Unicorn so enigmatic to modern viewers is the Lady. However unique she appears to modern audiences, “in the medieval world of allegory, the centrality of the feminine was never surprising.”³ A woman portraying a conceptual idea such as Liberty, Justice, or the five senses was common practice, and the Lady in the tapestries is arguably an allegorical figure depicting the five senses. She is, however, unique in her loneliness and her role as armorial bearer.

The Lady in the tapestries is slender and tall, with a small chest and long torso. She has long golden hair alternating between being worn up and left undone. Each dress is elegant and at the height of late fifteenth-century fashion. The watered silk, or moiré, the Lady and her handmaiden wear, like the Lady’s blue underskirt in Sight, was a popular fabric type and was in “great vogue” in tapestry weavings from Brussels workshops circa 1480-1525.³ Her eyes are downcast, her lips are full, her body is elegant and elongated. She is demure, graceful and calm. In essence, she is the fashionable and ideal medieval beauty.

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³ Dr. Jesse Hurlbut, professor of French medieval literature at Brigham Young University, in a personal communication.
Christine de Pizan never discusses an ugly or haggard woman in her treatises. Youthful, beautiful virgins, righteous wives and patient widows make up the largest population in the City of Ladies. Even widows are young and attractive, such as Antonia, wife of Drusus Tiberius. She was “…a grieving widow in the flower of her youth, resplendent in her sovereign beauty.” One of the only physical descriptions Christine writes of Reason is that she has “radiant beauty.”

Beauty is a stressed quality in each of Christine’s heroines. Griselda is an outstanding example. She was so virtuous and patient, constantly caring for her ailing father, spinning and weaving to make ends meet, that the grandest marquis in the land noticed her. He “noted this maiden’s upright conduct and integrity, as well as the beauty of her body and face, and therefore he held her in great favor.” One day he delivered her from poverty by assembling his court and marrying her. Physical beauty is essential in the ‘perfect’ woman, and in both The City of Ladies and The Lady and the Unicorn, outward beauty is a sign of inward virtue.

The Lady in the tapestries does not exhibit characteristics of a married woman. She is never depicted with a man and her loose hair and idealized features exemplify maidenhood. Kim Phillips, whose scholarship focuses on medieval maidens, described such depictions as belonging to “…those images of teenaged girls with long blonde hair, garlands or crowns, and conventional beauty [which] celebrated the unique combination of sexuality and virginity which most strongly defined maidenhood as a phase in the life cycle.”

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84 City of Ladies, 159.
85 Ibid.
86 City of Ladies, 8.
87 City of Ladies 171.
88 Ibid. 171.
signaled sexual availability and, simultaneously, virginity.\textsuperscript{90} To Christine, this type of blonde hair was the most beautiful adornment a woman could have. After condemning the extravagant French styles in clothes and headdress, Christine writes: “Nothing, after all, is a more beautiful headdress for a woman than fine blonde hair, as St. Paul bears witness when he says: “Hair is a woman’s capital ornament.”\textsuperscript{91} This reference is from 1 Corinthians 11:15, in which Paul writes: “But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.” The Lady in \textit{Sight} and \textit{Touch} has such long, free-flowing, blonde hair. In \textit{A Mon Seul Désir} and \textit{Sound} her hair works as a substitute for a headdress, long braids wrapping around her head ending in plumes of hair jutting above her forehead. She wears simple headdresses in \textit{Taste} and \textit{Smell}, in which her hair is still visible.

The Lady’s virginity and intangibility make her an object of desire. Because she is a maiden, her activities in the gardens of the tapestries are seen as innocent by the viewer, her serenity is understood, and she appears perfectly in-tune with maidenly conventions of medieval courts. Her virginity and innocence also lend the tapestries an air of voyeurism. Viewers believe they are the sole watchers of a beautiful young woman quietly occupying herself amidst equally lovely flowers and animals, unaware of another presence.

Not only is this Lady a maidenly virgin, she is also wealthy and educated, participating in activities reserved for women of privilege and knowledge. She wears extraordinary dresses, ornate jewels, and her handmaiden often appears as a contrast in her simpler gowns. In short, the Lady is an idealized allegorical figure epitomizing courtly virtues and feminine values, with

\textsuperscript{90} Phillips, \textit{Medieval Maidens}, 46.
\textsuperscript{91} City of Ladies, 176.
a certain “grâce aristocratique.” It is improbable the Lady is a portrait of a historical woman, such as Claude le Viste, as has been suggested in the past. Tapestries were not a common medium for portraits, and despite the ladies’ individualized features in each tapestry, she is not the same woman but an ideal. Michael Camille described her as “not one but five women, each a facet of the le Viste’s fantasy of self-regard.”

In *Sight* (figure 1) the unicorn gently rests his forelegs in the lap of the Lady, who in turn gazes down at him and wraps her arm around his neck. The exchange of glances is intriguing; the Lady looks at the unicorn who returns her gaze, and the lion looks disinterestedly in another direction. The unicorn’s reflection in the hand mirror creates a fourth gaze that is also directed at the Lady. Effectively this creates a triangle whose base is made up of the unicorn’s double portrait and the Lady’s face at the apex. It is her downcast eyes, ovoid face and serene expression that are the focus of the tapestry. The triangular composition also lends stability and a quiet reverence to the piece, and creates an economy of spectatorship by keeping the viewer’s focus in a single area of the tapestry.

Mirrors as a denotation of vanity were a common symbol in medieval art and literature. For example, in the *Roman de la Rose*, the most popular medieval French text which readers of Christine de Pizan would have certainly been aware, the allegorical figure Friend relates a discussion of chastity and vanity to the hero in these words: “…any woman who wants to be

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beautiful or who strives to appear so, gazing at herself and making great efforts to adorn and beautify herself, is willing to make war on Chastity.”

The tapestry *The Whore of Revelation* (figure 16), woven by Nicolas Bataille in the late fourteenth century, depicts a woman who is admiring herself in the mirror while combing her long, loose hair. The connections to vanity are inescapable in this work. The woman clearly illustrates the dangers of losing oneself to narcissistic love. As an allegory, Vanity is often shown with a woman carrying a mirror, embracing her or lurking in the shadows, like in Albrecht Dürer’s woodcut, *The Vanity Fool*, from the *Ship of Fools* done in the early sixteenth century (figure 17).

In *Sight* the mirror has a double purpose, neither of which is to symbolize vanity. The mirror is the symbol of vision as one of the senses, and the second purpose is found in the mirror’s reflection. The unicorn in the Lady’s lap alluded to the tale of the hunt of the unicorn, who could only be captured by the scent of a maiden’s chastity and then ambushed by awaiting hunters. This tale was also an allegory for Christ, whose mortality was also only made possible through contact with the chaste maiden Mary.

In a textual example of a mirror from the mid-fourteenth century, *Le Roman de la Dame à la Licorne*, the poet likens his beloved to a “mirror, clean, shining unsullied,” reflecting the image of himself and the love of his Lady. Like the lady in the *Roman de la Dame à la Licorne*, the Lady in *Sight* is herself is an allegorical mirror. The Lady is pure and chaste, and a worthy

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96 F. Salet argued that *Sight* represents nothing more than such a capture in: Salet, "De nouveau la Dame à la licorne," 161.
97 Phyllis Ackerman argued in 1935 that each tapestry in *The Lady and the Unicorn* represented the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception, rather than the five senses. While visual connotations to Mary are particularly strong in *Smell, Taste, and Sight*, there is not enough evidence to argue the tapestries represent a narrative in any way. Phyllis Ackerman, “The Lady and the Unicorn,” *Burlington Magazine* 66 (1935): 35-36.
98 Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 47.
vessel for the image of Christ to be reflected upon. Her own face imitates the shape of the mirror, and the aigrette plume atop her forehead parallels its spire. Both the Lady’s and the mirror’s face are directed at the unicorn, a symbol of Christ.

Considering the mirror tradition in the medieval Christian paradigm, Katie Langdon wrote:

“All Christians were responsible for the imitation or imaging of Christ, the ‘Logos,’ in their own lives. To listen to the word and not obey, is like looking at your own features in a mirror, and then, after a quick look, going off and immediately forgetting what you looked like. But the one who looks steadily at the perfect law of freedom and makes that his habit – not listening and then forgetting, but actively putting it into practice – will be happy in all that he does.”

Langdon’s scholarly attempt in this essay is to relate Christine de Pizan’s writings to the classical tradition of Plutarch, Seneca and Aristotle, who also wrote treatises on the behavior of the monarchy and noble class. Langdon refers to this literary genre as “the mirror of princes,” because the object of their writings was to benefit rulers by inspiring self-reflection. She includes Christine’s writings in this tradition, written for both male and female leaders. Charity Cannon Willard, in her recent translation of The Treasury of the City of Ladies, described the entire work as a mirror to which women were expected to see ways to perfect themselves.

In a similar way, the Lady in Sight is holding a mirror, and its reflection is not of herself, as in The Whore of Revelation, but the unicorn’s pure white face, a symbol of Christ’s visage in her own.

This was not an unusual allegorical depiction of a woman’s inner piety as a reflection of Christ’s image in medieval and Renaissance art. The Wise Woman (figure 18), a print by Anton Woensam of circa 1525, is a symbolic image of the most prized virtues in a woman. In her right hand she holds a mirror, in the same posture as the Lady in Sight (figure 19). In the print, the reflection shows an image of the crucifixion, and the caption explains this symbolizes the

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99 Kate Langdon Forhan, “Reflecting Heroes; Christine de Pizan and the Mirror Tradition,” in The City of Scholars; New Approaches to Christine de Pizan, 190.
100 Treasury of the City of Ladies, 30, 36.
woman’s chastity and piety. Comparable also to *Sight*, the woman holding the mirror does not directly gaze into its reflection. She is not interested in her own visage, but is a worthy reflector of Christ’s.

Another virtuous, maidenly female to carry the image of Christ was Mary. The “Divine Mirror” for all women, the Virgin was the paragon for women of all ages and stages of life. Marianism was strong in France in the late fifteenth century, and her attendant iconography was well known. One of her visual manifestations was as a maiden with a unicorn in exact similitude to *Sight*, excepting the mirror. A beautiful example is an illuminated miniature by the Master of Edward IV, circa 1500 (figure 22). This is an Annunciation scene, recognizably different than hunt of the unicorn images because of the angel’s presence. Encircling Mary is a fence, the hortus conclusus, which is another motif in *The Lady and the Unicorn* to be discussed later. Mary’s face echoes the oval shape, large forehead and downcast eyes of the Lady in *Sight*, and both women perform as mirrors of Christ.

The mirror in *Sight* is a magnificent creation. Larger than the Lady’s torso, the mirror appears as if she should need more than one gently clasped hand to hold it aloft. It is made of finely wrought gold, rings of gems encrusting the base, handle, and top, complete with golden nobules decorating the outer casing of the mirror. This mirror is alike in function and style to the mirror Reason carries with her in *The City of Ladies*, which she described to Christine:

“Since I serve to demonstrate clearly and to show both in thought and deed to each man and woman his or her own special qualities and faults, you see me holding this shiny mirror which I carry in my right hand in place of a scepter. I would thus have you know truly that no one can look into this mirror, no matter what kind of creature, without achieving clear self-knowledge. My mirror has such great dignity that not without reason is it surrounded by rich and precious gems, so that you see, thanks to this mirror, the essences, qualities, proportions, and measures of all things are known, nor can anything be done well without it.”

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103 *City of Ladies*, 9.
Just as the Lady in *Sight*, Reason holds a mirror in her right hand. There is no escaping the reflection Reason offers, which gives “clear self-knowledge” to each viewer, and perhaps connects to Christine’s desire that her own work would provide similar knowledge to the noblewoman who read her *City of Ladies* and *Treasury of the City of Ladies*. Charity Willard wrote: “Christine thus recommends “holding the mirror up to nature” more than two centuries before Molière.”

Through the Lady’s mirror, her “essence” is made known. The mirror may also function to encourage viewer involvement, as it is faced outward for all to consider their own reflection. Perhaps the mirror in *Sight* serves a moral purpose comparable to Reason’s mirror, in order for the viewer to discover their “qualities” and decide if Christ’s image, or Logos, is reflected in their own lives and visage.

It is a tantalizing possibility to imagine the young le Viste daughters as viewers of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, which could possibly increase the series’ moral significance. Young, educated women such as Claude, Jeanne and Geneviève le Viste would have been the intended audience of Christine de Pizan’s moral lessons, being daughters of a wealthy and well-connected member of the upper class. Perhaps *The Lady and the Unicorn* were commissioned not only to exhibit the le Viste’s wealth and but as visual guides to the proper behavior of maidenly women of their social class for Jean IV’s daughters. Allusions to Mary are scattered throughout the series, as well as possible allusions to Christine de Pizan’s teachings. Christine de Pizan and the Virgin served as two leading female guides in fifteenth-century French culture, and

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104 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 31.
allusions to them would have been appropriate and understood in a series of tapestries whose audience were women, particularly young, unwed women.105

In the second tapestry in the series, titled Hearing, the Lady is wearing what may be her finest gown in the series, playing an organ (figure 3). Her handmaiden works the bellows, and the lion and the unicorn take secondary positions as standard bearers. The composition is circular; the viewer’s eyes move from one figure to the next in a round motion. The rug underneath the organ was an unmistakable sign of wealth. It is an expensive, oriental rug, which were not used on floors in the Middle Ages, but on tables. It seems peculiar to place an organ, which needs a perfectly flat surface to function properly, onto a lush rug. The rug’s purpose therefore is not practical, but as property. It shows in concrete terms the wealth of the Lady and consequently the wealth of the patron.

Musical training for young women was reserved for the wealthy upper classes that could afford to educate their daughters beyond household tasks. By playing the organ, the Lady in the tapestry is exhibiting a humanistic and fully rounded education. On a metaphysical level, the Lady’s musical ability proves a connection between her mind and body, a display of her rationality. Medieval music especially focused on the importance of rationality, modulation and balance. In her studies on music in the later Middle Ages, Elizabeth Leach wrote: “The key feature that defines music in the Middle Ages is its expression of a rationality, which human beings alone of all the sublunary animals also possess.”106 The ability to create music brings

105 It is interesting to note here that Christine linked herself to Mary in her writings through textual allusions in The City of Ladies. After the three virtues have described Christine’s mission to build the City, she responds: “…although the awesomeness of this news seems strange to me, I know well that nothing is impossible for God...Behold your handmaiden ready to serve. Command and I will obey, and may it be according to your words” (15-16). This is a direct allusion to Mary’s response to Gabriel’s visit in Luke 1:38: “And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”

beings closer to God and presents the best part of humanity. Referring to the Lady in *Hearing*, J. P. Jourdan wrote: “Par les lois de l’harmonie, l’âme entre dans la concorde divine.”

Discussions concerning music and women’s ability to create or perform it are conspicuousely absent in *The City of Ladies* and *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. However, recent scholarly attempts have been made to uncover how Christine de Pizan’s poems and ballades were involved in the music of fifteenth-century France. Evidenced in extant musical scores, one of her poems, *Dueil Angoisseux*, was set to music. *Dueil Angoisseux* was a part of her *Poems of Widowhood*, her first foray into the literary world, and is a harrowing lament. The Franco-Flemish composer Gilles Binchois (1400-1460) may have been the original musician to set Christine’s poem to music. The first stanza reads:

“Anguished grief, immoderate fury, grievous despair, full of madness, endless languor and a life full of misfortune, full of tears, anguish and torment, doleful heart, living in darkness, wraithlike body on the point of death, are mine continually without cease; and thus I can neither be cured nor die.”

This kind of lament was specifically associated with women, as according to medieval thought stemming from ancient philosophy, women were particularly apt to feel such unending

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sorrow.\textsuperscript{113} Using a woman’s poem for a musical lament may have been a deliberate choice of the composer. Liane Curtis argues:

“That a work drawing on a lament as its \textit{cantus firmus} employed characteristics that were perceived as feminine, is not, I suggest, an accident, but rather an attempt to draw on the special powers of women, to evoke the resonances of the feminine liminality that provides the lamenting woman with her valuable cathartic strength, a strength recognized as an area of feminine superiority.”\textsuperscript{114}

Therefore, both the lament as a musical form and Christine’s writings shared a common empowerment of women by emphasizing culturally perceived feminine virtues and strengths, and their union in the form of music was particularly meaningful.

Musicologists have ignored women’s roles in medieval music until the last twenty years, around the same time Christine’s works were also being re-examined, and are now of great academic interest. Concerning their pursuits in musical production and performance, Curtis stated: ”Women were confined to a limited role, but within those confines their power was special and acknowledged.”\textsuperscript{115} This same idea is mirrored directly in Christine’s writings, particularly \textit{The Treasury of the City of Ladies}, in which Christine offers advice for women on how to affect positively her sphere of influence where she has power. Whatever her role was, the medieval woman did in fact create and perform music, as depicted in \textit{Hearing}. Christine’s writings, \textit{The Lady and the Unicorn}, and fifteenth-century French music were all influenced by “an abstracted feminine ideal,” and perhaps make a visual intersection in \textit{Hearing}.\textsuperscript{116}

The Lady in this tapestry is clearly a woman in the secular world. She is not performing a hymn or sacred song in an abbey or church; her elaborate costume and the setting do not allow for it. Sacred musical scenes including organs similar to the one in \textit{Hearing} appear in

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\textsuperscript{113} Liane Curtis, “Christine de Pizan and ‘Dueil Angoisseux,” 268.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 274.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 276.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 276.
\end{flushleft}
works like Jan van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*, circa 1423–32, in which angels sing along with the music of the organ. An illuminated page by the Master of Luçon from the Chester Beatty 104 manuscript, circa 1405, depicts the Virgin Mary seated in a garden with the Christ child surrounded by angels, one of which is playing a portable organ like the one in *Hearing*.\(^{117}\) Compared to these pieces, it is clear the Lady is not in an attitude of devotional music making.

Christine described the two ways of a Christian life, the active and the contemplative, in *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. She writes: “The perfect contemplative often is so ravished that she seems other than herself, and the consolation, sweetness, and pleasure she experiences can scarcely be told, nor can any earthly joy be compared with them.”\(^{118}\) To Christine, and her other contemporary writers, the higher path was certainly the contemplative way. This is necessarily contentious, as not every woman can follow this holy path. Christine recognizes this, and puts her readers to rest, writing through the allegorical figure Holy Information:

“Here is what you will do. God does not insist that you leave everything to follow Him except for those who wish to devote themselves to a perfect life. Rather, each can save herself according to her own state. When God says that it is impossible for the rich to be saved, he means the rich without virtue; those who do not distribute their wealth in alms; those who truly pleasure in their possession.”\(^{119}\)

In this way, *Hearing* may also convey a moralizing message. The Lady does not follow the contemplative life but rather the active life, as evidenced in her clothing and activities. However, the maiden maintains her virtue by exemplifying worthy attributes in each tapestry. Medieval viewers of *Hearing*, and perhaps even the le Viste daughters, were reminded of the importance to remain virtuous while living an active rather than contemplative life.

\(^{117}\) The Chester Beatty Manuscript 104 was a book of hours in a private collection, destroyed by fire in 1998. Images are not available to the public. 

\(^{118}\) *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 79. Christine had two children, a daughter and a son, and when her daughter came of age, she joined an abbey.

\(^{119}\) *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 82.
In *Smell* the lion and the unicorn occupy the periphery of the composition as standard bearers, but their attention is engaged in the Lady (figure 4). The Lady is collecting delicate red and white carnations from a large platter held by her handmaiden, creating a garland (figure 20). An ape joins the cast of animals, and is playing his role as the imitator of man. He smells a white rose chosen from the basket he clasps, and portrays the sense of smell. Of the six tapestries, the Lady’s hair is here presented the most modestly, and her downcast eyes and demure expression make this Lady the most reserved and maidenly of the six tapestries.

Red and white were colors associated with the Virgin Mary, as were carnations. Perhaps these attributes are connecting the maiden to her virginity, spiritual chastity and her eventual marriage. The medieval viewer would have been struck by her innocence and maidenly state, and reminded of the Virgin, who also appears alone in such gardens. The maiden’s covered head and the carnations denote religious undertones in *Smell*, and here the Lady mirrors Mary’s attributes as the greatest maiden of all.

The sense of smell plays interesting roles in connection to virtuous women in Christine’s *City of Ladies* and especially in *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. Good odor signaled inward and outward cleanliness, and was often used as a metaphor for personal cleanliness in thought and action. Christine wrote that a woman’s good reputation should, like the odor of sanctity, “waft across the world so that everyone is aware of it” in order to let others “sense her good example.” A good woman’s morality and cleanliness should emanate from her being, to an extent that others should be able to sense it like an odor. Virtue therefore is not only an intellectual conception, but something that can be physically sensed. The five senses as an

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120 Gourlay, “La Dame à la Licorne: A Reinterpretation,” 61.
121 Gourlay, “La Dame à la Licorne: A Reinterpretation,” 59.
122 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 91.
allegory may therefore not only adhere to medieval artistic conventions in *The Lady and the Unicorn*, but also relate to the virtue and goodness of the Lady.

To maintain this “good odor,” a woman must remain chaste. This extends beyond maidenhood virginity, but chastity of heart and mind throughout life. Christine wrote:

“…chastity keeps the soul from corruption, maintaining it in cleanliness and keeping its renown for good odor.”

Again scent resurfaces in Christine’s texts in the form of a popular medieval proverb, of which she wrote concerning noble women:

“Furthermore, they will set a fine example to other women if they are viewed as courteous, humble, not excessively domineering in their own households nor insisting overmuch on domestic service, and as well are amiable, kindly, poised and dressed without extravagence. They will exemplify the common proverb: What is good is in good odor.”

The sense of smell extends beyond one of the five senses in Christine’s writings; it is an indicator of individual purity and cleanliness. The Lady in *Smell* may also be associated with these positive metaphors of good odor. The presence of roses and carnations may also connect the Lady with Christine’s texts and common proverbs because of their fame as the two loveliest smelling flowers in medieval botany. The Lady’s virtue is exalted through the five senses, especially with the sense of smell in this tapestry.

The Lady is the center of the composition in *Taste*; the breeze gently lifts her headdress and a parakeet is perched on her gloved finger (figure 5). Her handmaiden is again helpful as she holds a *drageoir* with round white treats the Lady is feeding the parrot. The lion and the unicorn stand close at hand with their banners carrying the le Viste’s arms. A young unicorn is woven into the background behind the Lady, and the ape appears again below the maiden. The semi-circular wooden fence further secludes the ladies, enclosing their space into an even

123 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 182.
124 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 179.
125 Anna Nilsen, “The Lady with the Unicorn; on Earthly Desire and Spiritual Purity,” 228.
smaller realm. We are reminded yet again that the Lady resides in another domain separate from that of the common man, and again of the Lady has visual connotations to the Virgin.¹²⁷

By including numerous symbols associated with the Virgin Mary, The Lady and the Unicorn do not only present the viewer with an idealized woman with attributes akin to the Virgin, but also solidifies their position in the tradition of medieval iconography. In this way, perhaps it was not seen as quite so unusual to devote such expensive and large tapestries to the subject of single women because The Lady and the Unicorn follow iconographical norms through visual associations with the Virgin. Christine also used textual allusions to the Virgin in a parallel way to further ground her own work in the canon of medieval written word. By calling the Virgin by her various attributes, like Heavenly Queen, Temple of God, Cell of Cloister of the Holy Spirit, Christine is using “a rhetorical device reminiscent of the topos of the nomina Christi, serves to heighten the authority of Christine’s work.”¹²⁸

The Virgin is the first lady invited to enter the City of Ladies to reign as empress. Mary accepts this role, responding to Justice:

“O Justice, greatly beloved of my Son, I will live and abide most happily among my sisters and friends, for Reason, Rectitude, and you, as well as Nature, urge me to do so. They serve, praise, and honor me unceasingly, for I am and will always be the head of the feminine sex. This arrangement was present in the mind of God the Father from the start, revealed and ordained previously in the council of the Trinity.”¹²⁹

In both The Lady and the Unicorn and City of Ladies, the Virgin Mary is the ultimate example of feminine strength and righteous behavior.

Connections between Christine’s The City of Ladies and The Lady and the Unicorn continue in the tapestry Touch (figure 2). Here the Lady gently grasps the unicorn’s horn in one hand and the le Viste’s heraldic banner in the other. In this tapestry the Lady is not demurely engaged in

¹²⁷ Gourlay, “La Dame à la Licorne: A Reinterpretation,” 59.
¹²⁸ Treasury of the City of Ladies, 269.
¹²⁹ City of Ladies, 218.
her hands’ activities, or gazing at her handmaiden or at one of the beasts in this tapestry, as she is in every other tapestry. In *Touch* she is looking to something outside the composition, the only time the Lady breaks the boundaries of her secret world and engages with the outside. The lion also looks outside the composition; in fact, he stares out at the viewer, encouraging their involvement.

Whatever its differences, *Touch* presents a corresponding message with regard to the le Vistes. In this tapestry the Lady seems the strongest, with a forward sway and steadfast eyes. The Lady is directly representing the le Vistes. There can be no doubt of the le Vistes’ desire to connect themselves through their heraldry to the Lady in *The Lady and the Unicorn*. She is their visual emissary and ambassador, embodying their nobility and virtues, like Jean IV’s only daughters, who were the only inheritors of their father’s earned wealth and prominence.

Again the Lady may be a visual example for the three young le Viste women. She proudly bears the family arms, looking unafraid and firm in her deportment. One of Christine’s favorite types of women to discuss are those who save their families, husbands, kings, and even nations. Judith, Esther, and Lady Veturia are three prominent citizens in her City who saved her civilization through her own particular female virtues. Christine also wrote a poem honoring Joan of Arc, who took upon herself the banner of France to rally her people to action. She wrote of her:

“Oh, what an honor to the female sex! That God loves it is clear with all these wretched people and traitors who laid waste the whole kingdom cast out and the realm elevated and restored by a woman – something a hundred thousand men could not have done! Before, one would not have believed it possible.”

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130 *City of Ladies* 150.
It took a woman to encourage France to rebel against the “false” English.\textsuperscript{133} This is a recurring theme in Christine’s writings in which women’s unique qualities provide them with power. Maureen Quilligan wrote that in fact Joan of Arc’s “dramatic leadership may have emerged in part because of the broader consciousness of female power that Christine developed through her writing.”\textsuperscript{134} In other words, Joan of Arc’s position as a powerful leader and woman may have been only possible through the intellectual and social efforts of Christine de Pizan before her.

The Lady in \textit{Touch} appears to be the most authoritative woman in the series, part of which may be explained through her position as standard-bearer. Her role as representative of the le Viste family gives her power. It connects her to images of patriotic women willing to surrender their own identity for a larger cause, who Christine was particularly fond of honoring. In an illustration of Martin le Franc’s \textit{Champion des Dames}, circa 1421-1451 (figure 24), Joan of Arc is shown as a woman of action carrying the heraldic shield of France and a spear. However, her feminine features have not been entirely disguised under her heavy armor and masculine regalia; from under her hat her long hair flows freely, an image of feminine beauty as mentioned earlier. Joan’s stance and her role as heraldic bearer resemble the Lady in \textit{Touch}, who stands in a similar way, her right hand gripping the standard rather than a spear. Both women take on a traditionally masculine role while retaining feminine attributes and beauty.

\textit{A Mon Seul Désir} (figure 6) almost always receives the greatest amount of attention of all the tapestries in the \textit{Lady and the Unicorn}. It is an enigmatic tapestry that leaves the most questions unanswered. \textit{A Mon Seul Désir} is the largest of the six tapestries, and offers the viewer a new landscape involving a blue tent with a mysterious embroidered message: \textit{A Mon Seul

\textsuperscript{133} The Selected Writings of Christine de Pizan, 258.
A Lady is central, her body facing the viewer, as graceful as ever. She is storing her jewels in a casket held by her patient lady-in-waiting. A fanciful lapdog is perched beside her in a fairly prominent position, sitting on an embroidered pillow, a common symbol of loyalty in marriage.

Discussions about *A Mon Seul Désir* typically focus on the blue silk tent and its obscure message. The tent may be an allusion to an impending marriage, as in another Flemish tapestry *Couple sous un dais*, c. 1460-1465 (figure 21). However, the tent’s shape, size, and style were typical of any type of tent or pavilion, such as tents in war camps. The script is in its designated placement for any type of late medieval tent. Therefore the tent itself may not have connections to love, courtship or marriage at all. A romantic message is unlikely, since there is no lover present in *A Mon Seul Désir* as there is in tapestries like *Couple sous un dais*. Besides the small dog symbolizing fidelity, there are no other connections to wedding vows. The same dog appears in *Smell*, where no other visual allusions to marriage appear either.

The tent’s message, however, may have significance. ‘To my only desire’ could be a message from a lover to his beloved, a spiritual message, a message concerning the five senses, or something else entirely. This has been the most controversial aspect of any of the tapestries, and the subject of numerous scholarly publications. Alain Erlande-Brandenburg argued the vague inscription was an allusion to free will as the commander of the five senses, and therefore *A Mon Seul Désir* is the culminating tapestry in the series. He compared it to another tapestry, *Liberum Arbitrium* (“By one’s free will”) in the *Los Sentidos* series from the collections of Cardinal Erard de la Marck, and believed the Lady is displaying her free will by putting away her

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135 Gourlay, “La Dame a la Licorne: A Reinterpretation,” 66.
136 Anna Nilsen, “The Lady with the Unicorn; on Earthly Desire and Spiritual Purity,” 216.
jewels. Jean Gerson wrote of this ‘sixth sense,’ or free will of the heart that governs and rules the other senses, in a sermon delivered in Paris in 1402, saying:

“Et parleray des six sens, cinq dehors et ung dedans qui est le cuer, lesquelz nous sont baillez à gouverner comme six escoliers…De cuer: qui son cuer garde son âme garde.”

“And I will speak of the six senses, five outside and one inside, which is the heart; which senses are given for us to govern like six school children....Of the heart: who keeps his heart, keeps his soul.”

The heart is the governor of the five senses, the seat of reason, and the guard of the soul. If *A Mon Seul Désir* is considered a depiction of the heart’s ability to reason and control the appetites of man, then this tapestry would indeed be an appropriate culminating work to the series.

Christine de Pizan made Reason one of her guides in *The City of Ladies*, not unlike Virgil in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Likewise women should look to Reason to help guide their decisions, and eventually become worthy to enter the City of Ladies.

The composition in this tapestry mirrors the tent’s shape, with the Lady at the apex. There is visual movement upward; the lion and the unicorn face the Lady and gaze in her direction, and the handmaiden looks to her Lady’s face. The true focal point then is Lady’s eyes, which send the viewer’s attention downward to her hands and their graceful movement. However prominent the embroidered message is, the visual center of the tapestry is the Lady’s action.

The Lady may be storing her jewels, gently replacing them in the casket in which they belong, rather than removing them. Her left hand reaches to the box, and her right hand raises the fabric upon which the necklace lies to slide it in. She may be storing her jewels for her future

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138 Ibid.
140 Delahaye, *The Lady and the Unicorn*, 49.
wedding vows, or removing her jewels as a spiritual allegory of free will. Jean-Pierre Jossua described her action: “She renounces an appetite for riches and thereby sensual pleasure, to satisfy a deeper passion which is beyond the senses.”

Christine warned women of the upper class from spending too much time “inspecting your jewel boxes” in The Treasury of the City of Ladies, writing:

“Another of Pride’s infernal brands inspires you to say to yourself that you don’t have to work, or, indeed, do anything at all: You may live at your ease...Inspecting your jewel boxes and your wardrobes should be your sole occupation. Does it seem that God’s gift of time to everyone to use for good purpose allows you to be more idle than the rest? Wicked creature, surely you have learned from Saint Bernard’s sermons on the Song of Songs that idleness is the mother of all frivolities and the smotherer of virtues. Idleness makes even the strong and constant stumble into sin.”

Indeed, Christine’s message in this passage would inspire a woman to put away her jewels and vanity to use the “gift of time” more wisely, which is what the Lady appears to be doing in A Mon Seul Désir. However, Christine does not condemn a lady for wearing fine clothes. A beautiful woman in elegant clothes is just as likely to be chaste and good as any other. Christine uses the example of Claudia Quinta, a Roman woman, who dressed “in vain and beautiful clothing and in pretty ornaments. Because she was more refined than the other ladies in Rome, some people spoke badly of her and of her chastity, to the detriment of her reputation.”

However, when a carved statue of a goddess is being shipped up the Tiber and encounters trouble, Claudia Quinta prays to the goddess and because her “chastity was complete and wholly uncorrupted,” her prayer is answered. Therefore, a woman can be chaste and modest and still dress appropriately for her station. Each of the women in The Lady and the Unicorn is

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141 Delahaye, The Lady and the Unicorn, 47.
143 Treasury of the City of Ladies, 75.
144 City of Ladies, 205.
145 Ibid. 206.
exquisitely dressed, but again, outward beauty is a signal of inward virtues in Christine’s texts and in *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

The necklace the Lady is handling in *A Mon Seul Désir* is made of gold encircling red gemstones, perhaps rubies or garnets, with large pearls throughout. A Biblical allusion may have been brought to mind of the medieval viewer, from Proverbs 31:10 - 29:

“Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life....She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy....She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple....She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness....Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.”

The Lady in the tapestry is not only beautiful and well adorned in her exterior appearance, but also glorious in her character and spirit. Her visage is not misleading; her price is far above rubies. Though many ecclesiastical sermons whose topic concerned women were negative in tone and message in the fifteenth century, this passage of scripture would not have been unknown to the informed medieval viewer. The same qualities needed in a pious wife were also required of a noble maiden, who ideally needed to reach out to the poor, speak with wisdom, rule with the law of kindness, and tend to household duties. Christine de Pizan expresses this sentiment, writing:

“Ornaments cannot beautify as well as virtues. Virtues enhance the body of one desiring to live well because they are nobler than worldly riches. Why are they nobler? Because they endure forever and are treasures of the soul, which is everlasting. Other treasures pass like smoke. Therefore, those with a taste for virtues desire them more than any worldly thing can be desired. Shouldn’t those whose grace and good fortune seat them in the highest places be served the best? Virtues are the food of our table. Happily we will distribute them.”

In control of her five senses, the Lady is rational and dignified in *A Mon Seul Désir*. She has chosen to be virtuous and put away vanity, here illustrated in the form of an ornate necklace.

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146 *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, 71.
She replaces her jewelry in its casket because she understands they are temporal, and will “pass like smoke.” She recognizes the importance of the “treasures of the soul,” and that reason should guard the senses. When considered with the other tapestries, *A Mon Seul Désir* seems to portray through its written text and the Lady’s actions a singular desire to be in control of the five senses, to be wise and virtuous.\(^\text{147}\) Despite her riches, she wishes to be modest in spirit and appearance. Perhaps *A Mon Seul Désir* is after all a sort of culminating piece in the series; it is the summation of the maiden’s virtues.

**Conclusion**

Each tapestry in *The Lady and the Unicorn* is a window into a secret world meant to entrance the imagination. In stark contrast however are the le Viste’s family arms, disrupting these visions with a jarring reminder of the earthly world. They intentionally interrupt, meant to bring to the viewer’s mind the patrons and their wealth. Unlike most contemporary tapestries, the patron’s coat of arms are an integral part of each composition, unmistakable and obvious. The le Vistes are participants in this world, part of the nobility and virtues the Lady embodies.

It is impossible to know how involved Jean le Viste was in deciding the details woven in the tapestries. The allegory of the five senses in the tapestries was, to medieval viewers, clearly discernible. The other motifs, allusions, allegorical modes, and images may have brought to the medieval viewer’s mind specific ideas concerning aristocratic women and the ideas of Christine de Pizan. Specific textual images in Christine’s writings are visually illustrated in *The Lady and the Unicorn*, as has been argued here. Both text and tapestry focus on a single woman

performing one action in a world without male presence and are presented as dignified and noble. The senses play a part in both, more prominently in the tapestries, but sight and smell also appear in *The City of Ladies* and *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. Both works are designed with the potential audience of young, wealthy maidens, using idealized women as paragons for others to learn from and use as a mirror for self-reflection. The tapestries also present similar moralizing messages as championed in Christine’s texts, which may have been specifically chosen because of the immediate audience of the le Viste daughters. Marian symbolism and the medieval allegorical mode surface in both works, as do ideas of music and women having the power to influence their own spheres of experience.

The Lady was the visual emblem of the le Vistes’ political desires, ambitions, and gentility. She visually resembles the values of Christine de Pizan, an author whose texts helped define what nobility was in Paris in the fifteenth century. The chosen image of this civility, culture and refinement was a lady in both Christine’s texts and in *The Lady and the Unicorn*. The Lady in the tapestries is involved in activities appropriate for her station, and embodies the pinnacle of refinement and wealth. The tapestries are above all expressions of rationality, civility and courtliness depicted in the female form.

Christine constructed a positive and powerful image of women in her *City of Ladies* and *The Treasury of the City of Ladies*. She left a distinct mark on the late medieval mindset of the upper class in Paris and abroad. Her writings were distributed, discussed and incorporated in society and her metaphors, heroines and written images were well known and recognized in the motifs of *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Both text and tapestry emematized the ideal medieval maiden and women of strength and virtue.
The le Vistes may have also chosen the Lady as their visual emissary precisely because of the associations with “woman.” The family did not want to compete, to conquer or embarrass royalty with their newfound wealth. By including Marian symbolism, the Lady may have also been connected to the idea of Mary as Intercessor, a distinctly diplomatic and compassionate image. Perhaps they did not choose an aggressive image such as a knight (figure 8), but an attractive, peaceful and powerful woman who transcended the pettiness of everyday life.

Considering the nature of medieval tapestries, the role of women and the image of nobility, the famous *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries can be viewed in a different light than they have been before. Connecting the tapestries conceptually to Christine de Pizan’s writings and her incredible impact on the way women were viewed in fifteenth-century France may lead to a different understanding of the purpose of the tapestries’ commission, how the medieval viewer perceived them, and why the Lady is significant in her cultural and artistic context.

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148 Compare with the Flemish *mille fleurs* tapestry (figure 8) in which a fully armored male represents the arms Jean de Daillon. Here a militaristic and aggressive image was chosen to represent the family.
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**Figure 1.** Unknown artist, *Sight*, from *The Lady and the Unicorn*, ca. 1480–1500, wool and silk, (3.11 m x 3.30 m/10.20 ft. x 10.82 ft./122.4 in. x 129.84 in.). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 2. Unknown artist, Touch, from The Lady and the Unicorn, ca. 1480 – 1500, wool and silk, (3.69 - 3.73 m x 3.52 – 3.58 m/12.10 – 12.23 ft. x 11.54 – 11.74 ft./145.2 – 146.76" x 138.48 – 140.88") . Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 3. Unknown artist, Hearing, from The Lady and the Unicorn, ca. 1480 – 1500, wool and silk, (3.68 - 3.69 m x 2.90 m/12.07 – 12.10 ft. x 9.51 ft./144.84” x 114.12”). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 4. Unknown artist, *Smell*, from *The Lady and the Unicorn*, ca. 1480 – 1500, wool and silk, (3.67 - 3.68 m x 3.18 – 3.22 m/12.04 – 12.07 ft. x 10.43 – 10.56 ft.). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 5. Unknown artist, *Taste*, from *The Lady and the Unicorn*, ca. 1480 – 1500, wool and silk, (3.74 - 3.77 m x 4.58 – 4.66 m/12.27 – 12.36 ft. x 15.02 – 15.28 ft.). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 6. Unknown artist, *A Mon Seul Désir*, from *The Lady and the Unicorn*, ca. 1480 – 1500, wool and silk, (3.76 - 3.77 m x 4.63 – 4.73 m / 12.33 – 12.36 ft. x 15.19 – 15.51 ft.). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 7. Unknown artist, *The Noble Pastorale* tapestry, wool and silk, (h 2.20 m x w 3.19 m) early sixteenth century. Decorative Arts, Musée du Louvre, Paris. In the upper right corner are the arms of Catherine Briçonnet and Thomas Bohier (d. 1524), administrator of the royal finances under Charles VIII, Louis XI, and François I.
Figure 8. Unknown artist, Flemish *mille fleurs* tapestry, wool and silk, (11’ 10” x 9’ 2”/3.60 m. x 2.80 m), late fifteenth century. Montacute House, Yeovil, Somerset England, part of the National Trust. This tapestry shows a knight on horseback carrying the arms of Jean de Daillon, with his family heraldry in the upper left corner.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{149} Souchal, *Masterpieces of Tapestry*, 119 – 120.
Figure 9. Unknown artist, *La Lecture*, from *La Tenture de la Vie Seigneuriale* series, ca. 1525, wool and silk (2.95 x 2.39 m). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.
Figure 10. Unknown artist, Scènes Galantes, from La Tenture de la Vie Seigneuriale series, ca. 1525, wool and silk (2.62 x 3.72 m). Collection of Tapestries, Musée National du Moyen Âge, Paris, France.

Figure 11. Detail of Scènes Galantes.
Figure 12. Unknown artist, *St. Etienne*, tapestry IX, ca. 1500, wool and silk, (h. 1.68 m x w. 3.59 m). Tapestry collection, Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris. The arms of Jean III Baillet are proudly displayed on a post on the right of the composition.

Figure 13. Attributed to the Master of the Cité des Dames and workshop and to the Master of the Duke of Bedford, *Detail of a miniature of Christine de Pizan in her study at the beginning of the ’Cent balades,’* from *Various Works* (also known as ‘The Book of the Queen’), ca. 1410-1414, parchment codex, (365 x 285 mm. (245 x 195). Harley Manuscript Collection, Harley 4431 folio 4, British Library, London, England.

Figure 15. Unknown Artist, *Penelope at her Loom*, fragment from *The Story of Penelope and the Story of the Cimbri Women*, from the series *The Stories of Virtuous Women*, ca. 1480-83, wool and silk, (39 3/8 x 59 1/16 in. (100 x 150 cm). Textiles, Boston Museum of Fine Art, Boston.

Figure 17. Albrecht Dürer, *The Vanity Fool*, from the *Ship of Fools*, ca. early sixteenth century, woodcut. The Illustrated Bartsch, vol. X, Vienna, Austria.
**Figure 18.** Anton Woensam, Wolfgang Resch, *Allegory of Virtue*, ca. 1525, woodcut, (383 x 256 mm). The Illustrated Bartsch. Vol. XIII, Vienna, Austria. She is dressed in contemporary German garb and carries symbolic attributes explaining her virtues.

**Figure 19.** Details of *The Wise Woman* and *Sight*. 
Figure 20. Detail of Smell.

Figure 22. Master of Edward IV, *Virgin Mary: Annunciation*, folio 18v, G.5 manuscript, ca. 1500, paint on vellum. Morgan Library, New York.

Figure 23. Unknown artist, *The Fuller Brooch*, late 9th century AD, sheet silver (11.4 cm diameter). British Museum, London.
Figure 24. Unknown artist, Jeanne d’Arc compared to Judith, from manuscript of Martin le Franc’s *Champion des Dames*, ca. 1421-1451. Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France.