

*Saints, Sinners and Sisters. Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe.* By Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart (eds.). (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003; pp. xxiv + 274. £35.00).

This volume of eleven essays by feminist scholars sets out to provide ‘a supplemental reader [for use] by undergraduates and graduate students when studying Northern European art before the eighteenth century’ (p. xvi). The editors have sought to bring together a collection of essays to showcase the contribution gender-theoretical approaches can bring to the study of art history: notably, to areas both geographical (Northern Europe) and temporal (the medieval and early modern periods) in which such approaches remain relatively new. These are the stated aims of the work: the reality is somewhat different. The essays do not cover the periods evenly, with just three of the eleven dealing with medieval art. A glance at the footnotes reveals scanty evidence of editorial intervention, with some authors providing hardly any page references to the works they cite in support of specific points. The capitalization of ‘Late Medieval’ and ‘Early Modern’ gives – both to the reader and, somewhat unfortunately, to certain of the authors – the impression that these historical periods can be equated with monolithic movements, in the same way that we speak, with Capital Letters, of Cubists or Belgian Symbolists. More significant than all this is the diverse range of quality in these essays.

Carol M. Schuler’s ‘Virtuous Model/Voluptuous Martyr. The Suicide of Lucretia in Northern Renaissance Art and its Relationship to Late Medieval Devotional Imagery’ takes a strongly feminist approach to the depiction of Lucretia’s suicide in the early sixteenth century works of, *inter alia*, Joos van Cleve and Lucas Cranach. By far the most interesting section of this article deals with the utilization in these paintings of formal elements and stylistic techniques that had been developed in paintings of Christ as Man of Sorrows. Schuler demonstrates how the isolation of the moment of Lucretia’s suicide, with her being painted alone against a dark background, maximizes the affective power of the image upon the individual. More difficult is her analysis of the nakedness of Lucretia – a feature not associated with either Livy’s tale or contemporary Italian paintings of the scene, which emphasized instead Lucretia’s modesty and the political ramifications of her death. The incongruous presentation of Lucretia as naked and sexually alluring is assessed in all too conventional feminist terms. Indeed, the author herself admits this: ‘It has by now become almost a cliché to note in these images the objectivization of the female, who is observed, submissive, powerless in her nakedness, and deprived of individuality and free will, reinforcing male control over the passive female’ (p. 17). Although Schuler’s conclusion is measured, interesting and permissive of a range of possible viewer responses, we are left feeling slightly disappointed at the simplistic and tradition-bound resolution to the identified incongruity. A potential association between the nakedness of Christ and the nakedness of Lucretia, which would follow logically from her earlier conclusions, is neither mentioned nor explored.

Pia F. Cuneo's 'Jörg Breu the Elder's *Death of Lucretia*. History, Sexuality and the State' offers an analysis of a much more conventional depiction of Lucretia's suicide. Here, the focus in the narrative painting is entirely on the political consequences of the event. Cuneo's daring yet plausible identification of one of the male figures with Duke William IV of Bavaria, presented as the avenger of Roman virtue following Charles V's sack of Rome in 1527, allows an exciting new interpretation of this painting. This idea could have become an important contribution to the discussion of the representation of political aspirations in Reformation Germany, but is instead coupled to an unhelpful feminist hermeneutic that leads the essay in a predictable direction. Statements such as 'It is patriarchy (in ancient Rome as well as in Renaissance Munich) which defines a woman according to her sexual and biological status and which is based on access to and control of female sexuality. Improper access to that property results in nothing less than the overthrow of the state' (pp. 33f.) are surely overstated. Improper access results in the overthrow of the state because of the excessive demonstration of tyranny, not because of the improperly accessed property being women, or female sexuality. The essay throughout manifests a tension between the weighty tradition of the feminist ideology the author feels compelled to accommodate, and the actual conclusions that the author has reached by empirical investigation.

The third essay, Martha Moffitt Peacock's 'Domesticity in the Public Sphere', is by far the most significant of the entire collection, and reflects a particular strength of the volume in handling the Dutch Golden Age. Her primary contention posits a change in the nature of Dutch genre paintings involving women around 1650. After this point, they contain fewer items of obviously iconographic significance, and so become difficult to interpret as moralizing pieces. At the same time, the moralizing works of literature that provide the foundation for the conventional interpretation of such paintings underwent a rapid and marked decline in popularity. This reflects, she argues, a change in the perception of the role of women in the Netherlands. She demonstrates with clarity the influence she believes a series of prints by the female artist Geertruydt Roghman to have had in the artistic aspect of this change. Her secondary contention takes issue with the imposition of modern feminist polemic in an ahistorical fashion. Rejecting the idea of domesticity as inherently menial and denigratory, she forms a much more nuanced picture by showing how, in art and in literature, the home, the family, and the domestic role of the housewife in the management of these, were lauded as the foundation of Dutch society in the period after 1650. Rather than genre paintings of housewives emphasizing patriarchal control and oppression, they offered an empowering self-image to contemporary female viewers and reflected a sympathetic male gaze: a contemporary appreciation by men of the valuable role of women. This balanced, empirical approach makes a highly significant contribution not only to Dutch art history, but also to the understanding of late seventeenth-century Dutch society.

In 'The Gothic Mirror and the Female Gaze', Susan L. Smith ostensibly shares the concern to avoid the ahistorical imposition of the conventional feminist hermeneutic. She begins her essay by stating that 'my concern is to elucidate historically specific attitudes and expectations regarding women's use of the sense of sight that can be explored independently of the universalizing claims of theory' (p. 76). However, this promising enthusiasm for empirical understanding is not apparent in the body of the article. Smith examines a series of medieval ivory mirror cases, and concludes that the portrayal of male and female lovers accords the active role to the male and the passive role to the female. Her analysis uses the terminology of submission and control, loaded terms that reflect a tendentious reading of the material. Exploring the thematic interconnections between courtly romance and these mirror cases is undoubtedly a profitable line of inquiry, but it proves limited in this essay because of Smith's understanding of courtly romance and the medieval love-lyric as monolithic entities. In reality, the treatment of women in this literature varies considerably according to the individual work, geography and period, and in many instances it is the woman who holds the dominant position. Smith, however, does not allow for this. Nor does she offer much of an explanation of the exceptions to the rule that she has identified. These receive but a brief mention in the conclusion to her essay, and are categorized simply as 'provocative exceptions' (p. 86).

Linda C. Hulst's 'Dürer's *Four Witches* Reconsidered' makes a bold attempt to offer a new interpretation of this engraving from 1497 in the light of the famous witch-hunting tract, *Malleus Maleficarum*. She maintains that the devil, looking out directly at the viewer, competes with the viewer for authority over the four central female figures, and reflects the idea contained in the *Malleus* of a powerful diabolical force exercising dominion over women that the (male) viewer must resist. Her reading of the *Malleus* as an intensification of a misogyny intrinsic to Christianity is at best highly controversial, but this historical contextualization is fortunately not central to her interpretation. Otherwise, her argumentation is cohesive, and she provides a useful conspectus of existing interpretations of the work in which to locate her own. Indeed, Dürer's works intransigently resist a conclusive reading – this is part of the reason why they have proven so attractive to generations of scholars – and ultimately, Hulst's reading, however persuasive, remains one among many possible ways of understanding *The Four Witches*.

Alison G. Stewart takes a similar comparative approach in 'Distaffs and Spindles. Sexual Misbehavior in Sebald Beham's *Spinning Bee*'. She locates Beham's 1524 woodcut in the context of the contemporary literature in which the topos of the spinning room appears, regarding the printed image as a pictorial manifestation of a literary motif. This approach provides a valuable interpretative framework, although her suggestion that Hans Sachs' 1553 poem *Die Röckenstueben* drew its inspiration from Beham's print must be regarded with caution. It is more probable that this poem drew on the *Fastnachtspiel* tradition, a popular late medieval literary form of which very few examples survive, but which served as a central carrier for stock literary

topoi. Stewart proceeds to view Beham's woodcut in two further contexts: the new vigour given by Lutheran ideology to social reform in sixteenth-century Nuremberg, and the range of literary and artistic associations of the spinning metaphor. But whilst the working is exemplary, the result is less so. She argues that Beham's woodcut objectifies a condemnation of female licentiousness in a period of Lutheran constraint on the activities of women, writing that 'at a time when Nuremberg's authorities desired to reform popular culture, Beham's print shows female popular culture in desperate need of control and reform' (p. 145). Certainly, the woodcut shows popular culture in need of control, but Stewart's notion of specifically female culture being assailed is hard to support from the picture. The woodcut depicts sexual violence, with women attempting to defend themselves from male advances, and it is not easy to read an image of a woman fending off an aggressive rapist with a distaff as showing women to be 'easy to divert and possible to seduce' (p. 145).

Genevra Kornbluth provides the second essay to deal with a medieval topic, 'Richildis and Her Seal. Carolingian Self-Reference and the Imagery of Power.' She offers an engaging reading of a Carolingian gemstone which may depict Richildis, wife of Charles the Bald, as the classical figure of Omphale. Proceeding from this, her iconographic identification of Charles and Richildis as Hercules and Omphale is enticing – even plausible – yet ultimately, as with so much Dark Ages history, it relies on so many assumptions, possibilities and probabilities that it can be no more than an intriguing idea. Even the gemstone itself survives only in a drawing from 1729, possibly highly inaccurate. Kornbluth does not seek to conceal these evidential difficulties, and her essay is a testament to the limitations of the knowable in writing Carolingian history. Equally, it is a testament to what is achievable with the little evidence we do have, and the analysis of gender relationships in the ninth-century empire is illuminating.

Jane L. Carroll's 'Woven Devotions. Reform and Piety in Tapestries by Dominican Nuns' examines some extremely intriguing material: the images of Dominican sisters weaving in the margins of two tapestries, an *Adoration of Christ* and a Passion narrative, from c. 1500. It is therefore greatly regrettable that the essay fails to do justice to the material under examination. The first part of the article is given over to a rambling discussion of tapestry production in late medieval Dominican convents, culminating in a confusingly presented attribution of these two tapestries to the Dominican female convent in Bamberg. Carroll's conclusion is convincing: she argues that these images of weaving nuns, located respectively close to Mary and to Christ, encourage the nuns to manual work with the promise of heavenly reward – a key component of the Dominican reforms of the fifteenth century. Whilst the political mechanics of late medieval religious reforms are relatively well understood, the actual day-to-day impact of the observant reforms have scarcely been touched, and this essay could have provided a worthy contribution to the field. Yet Carroll's subsequent discussion of the Passion tapestry in the context of the *imitatio Christi* reflects an undifferentiated and imprecise understanding of the various forms of Passion

devotion, and her over-reliance on secondary literature in the contextualization of the images is all too evident. Despite much useful recent work having been done on the literary culture of southern Germany in the late Middle Ages, the examples which the author chooses are largely irrelevant. A series of errors is revealed in one particular passage:

Aligning such promises [of heavenly reward] with the *vita activa* was necessary in the Dominican Order which had traditionally separated the Martha [active] life from the *contemplatio plena* of Mary by class structure. In the Mendicant cloisters the Tertiaries, drawn from the lower social strata, performed the menial chores while the more patrician members of the Second Order restricted themselves to keeping the Holy Offices. In the reform, devotional tracts and works of art like these tapestries attempted to break down this division and persuade the lax sisters to undertake more arduous tasks. To this end, the Dominican mystic, Master Eckhart (d. 1327), was quoted: in his Ninth Sermon, he had lauded Martha as the higher good because she had turned contemplation into fruitful labor (p. 194).

Whilst the statement on the role of devotional works in the reform is secure, Carroll's description of mendicant female convents using the terminology of class structure is erroneous. Notwithstanding the differences between Franciscan and Dominican orders (here presented together as 'Mendicant'), Second Order sisters did not share convents with Third Order members: the servants in those especially wealthy Second Order convents in need of reform were not tertiaries. Tertiaries were both male and female and held to a less stringent version of the respective mendicant rules, with considerable regional and local variations; there is no evidence to support the view that they were consistently drawn from 'the lower social strata'; indeed, there is evidence that the contrary was often the case.<sup>1</sup> We are not then told by whom Eckhart 'was quoted', but that he was quoted by anyone in this context is unlikely. When Eckhart, the speculative mystic *par excellence* who had died nearly two hundred years prior to the manufacture of the tapestries in question, spoke of Martha's activity in comparison to Mary's passivity, he wrote of Martha's 'fruitful labour' as the practice of inner virtue. He certainly did not exhort anyone to, or extol the value of, manual work.<sup>2</sup> Comparisons with the contemporary production of illuminated manuscripts in female Dominican convents are relegated to a couple of paragraphs towards the end of the essay, but it is this approach which would bear further examination and yield much fruit.

Corine Schleif's 'The Many Wives of Adam Kraft. Early Modern Workshop Wives in Legal Documents, Art-historical Scholarship, and Historical Fiction' corrects the balance with an exemplary utilization of a contextual approach. Her concern is to rehabilitate the role of workshop wives in early modern art history, and in this she is successful. The specific instance of the wives of the Nuremberg sculptor Adam Kraft provides a fixed point from which Schleif maps out general trends, drawing on recent research in the field and on a wealth of primary material. She addresses the role of

wives as workshop managers and as financial administrators; their role in the provision of labour and their perceived status as reflected in the relative level of their payment; and their usefulness as widows to craftsmen seeking to ascend the commercial ladder. Her conclusions are striking and important, especially regarding workshops being passed from craftsman to craftsman by the remarriage of widows, not by inheritance from father to son or to son-in-law. Schleif's overall project of rehabilitating wives and workshops in art historiography, removing the 'Great Men' theory of art history, makes for excellent *history*. She writes that 'the authors of art history ignored the input of the wife, together with other aspects of collaboration, in order to create narratives with great (male) artists as solitary agents, solely influenced by each other' (pp. 216f.). Whether this makes for good *art history* is open to question, especially when we remember that we have only just been reminded how central Adam Kraft regarded his own talent to be in the production of his art: he refused to allow anyone else from his workshop to work on pieces for the Nuremberg Frauenkirche when he fell ill in 1508, considering their talent as insufficient for the task in hand.

Linda Stone-Ferrier's 'From Shrew to Poetess. Two Non-Traditional Female Roles Evoked by a Curious Painting by Gabriel Metsu' is another exemplary contribution, looking at Metsu's 'Weeping Woman in the Blacksmith's Shop', c. 1650, in the light of contemporary resonances the painting may have had for its audience. She establishes the uniqueness of the theme, and offers a good evaluation of existing interpretations. Alongside the suggestion, already in circulation, that the picture represents a miserly shrew from an Adriaen van de Venne farce, she offers two further possibilities: a reference to the much-lamented blinding in a smithy of the famous poetess Maria Tesselschade Visscher; and a variation on a pre-existent thematic preoccupation with ill-fated women in Metsu's oeuvre. Strikingly, Stone-Ferrier avoids an ideological approach, and does not offer an interpretation of this work in the conventional mode of understanding a Dutch genre painting as a positive or negative exemplum. Her approach, bolstered by considerable primary research, is very successful; it provides a model for further scholarship in which works are contextualized within a range of possibilities, and not according to just one set of references.

The final essay, Laurinda S. Dixon's 'Together in Misery. Medical Meaning and Sexual Politics in Two Paintings by Jan Steen' has a deceptively specific title for a much more widely valuable essay. Although her examples are two seventeenth-century paintings by Steen, Dixon's bold project is a reassessment of the meaning of Dutch medical genre paintings in the light of contemporary medical knowledge. She rejects the conventional understandings of these paintings with circumspection, and offers an excellent discussion of the possibilities for the transmission of scholarly medical knowledge to artists and to the viewers of the paintings. These necessary preconditions established, she identifies these genre paintings as representing women suffering from hysteria and men from melancholia, gender-specific illnesses that

reflect a conscious categorization of disease according to gender relationships on the part of the artists and contemporary viewers. The depth of her learning in making these suggestions is evident, although – as so often in this volume – too much force is given to a purely speculative aspect of the interpretation, in this case understanding paintings of hysterical women to be reverse or negative exempla: as admonitions against virgins remaining unmarried, and therefore sexually inactive, too late in life.

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#### NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous studies of individual houses exist; for general trends in the organisation of Second Order and Tertiary convents in this period see John R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order from its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 406-16, 548-59 (Second Order) and 417-28, 560-8 (Tertiaries); Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 89-137; R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215 – c. 1515* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 108-16; W. A. Hinnebusch, *A History of the Dominican Order, 2: Intellectual and Cultural Life to 1500* (New York: Alba House, 1979); on the problems of assessing social origins, see John B. Freed, *The Friars and German Society in the Thirteenth Century*, Mediaeval Academy of America Publication 86 (Cambridge 1977), pp. 109-34.

<sup>2</sup> Sermon 86, *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum*, is to be found in Meister Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, ed. Josef Quint (6 vols, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1934-) iii. 472-503.