

Luxury could be a burden as much as a pleasure. The urge to lavishness exerted financial pressures. Fourteenth-century consumers had to deal with war, plague, bank collapses, and the late fourteenth-century bullion famine. Yet Stuard contends that the fashion impulse helped stave off the worst of the late-century depression by stimulating demand. Another of fashion's drawbacks is the stress of the necessity to keep up appearances in the face of the demands of novelty and ever-changing tastes. The personal dimension to relationships between clothes and their wearer are difficult to trace in available sources, yet some vivid accounts are available through saints' lives. Francis of Assisi famously gave back his rich robes to his father, while Angela of Foligno was one among a number of devout women said to have stripped off their extravagant garments in symbolic rejection of worldly chains.

While fashion is the book's thematic heart, half its substantive chapters are devoted to related aspects of luxury consumption and the fourteenth-century Italian economy. Chapter 5 is a study of the cost of luxuries and its implications for revising theories of a late fourteenth-century depression. Chapter 6 examines the retail and production aspects of luxury through discussion of shopping cultures and the activities of craftsmen, especially goldsmiths. Chapter 7 considers bankers and merchants as "marketmakers," fostering the trade in luxuries upon which their profits depended. The book demonstrates that there is nothing frothy about the history of fashion and luxury. It is a highly serious study, densely detailed and enormously learned. As befits its subject it provides a wealth of information on every page, drawing on expert knowledge of archival, literary, and visual sources. The prose is crisp and rigorously concise. Other historians might have made two books out of the same material. It repays close reading and will supply inspiration for many years to come.

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Elizabeth L'Estrange. *Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty, and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages.* (Manchester Medieval Studies.) Manchester University Press, 2008. Pp. xvii + 282; illus.

ELIZABETH L'ESTRANGE'S recent book, *Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty, and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, offers a study of maternal images (scenes of the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Birth of the Virgin, St. Anne,

St. Elizabeth, the Holy Kinship, etc.) appearing in a number of fifteenth-century manuscripts, primarily books of hours belonging to both female and male members of the houses of Anjou and Brittany. The book is thoroughly illustrated, including a section in color, and also includes as appendices prayers for childbirth that appear in the Hours of Marguerite of Foix and the Prayer Book of Anne of Brittany. The text is divided into two parts: the first focused on methodological considerations in the interpretation of images of holy motherhood, and the second presenting detailed case studies of the patronage and reception of specific manuscripts and the maternal imagery they contain.

Chapter 1 builds from Michael Baxandall's classic art historical formulation of the "period eye" to a new concept of the "situational eye" (pp. 32–33). Baxandall's original formulation recognized that fifteenth-century viewers saw fifteenth-century images using different cultural equipment from that used by modern viewers and so saw those images differently from the way in which we see them today.¹ L'Estrange's revision of his concept recognizes that different groups of fifteenth-century viewers had different sets of cultural equipment that they would have brought to seeing and understanding images, resulting in different levels of "sensitivity" on their part to the details of those images (p. 37 and *passim*). The following chapters in the first part of the book detail different aspects of the cultural equipment that later medieval viewers would have brought to images of holy motherhood, including medical knowledge and prayers for successful childbirth (chapter 2), and the practices of lying-in and churching after childbirth (chapter 3).

While these prayers and practices were primarily part of lay women's experiences, and so would have shaped their reception of images of holy motherhood in particular, L'Estrange argues that such experiences were not unavailable to men, and so they may have understood such images in ways similar to their female contemporaries. L'Estrange argues against an immediate identification of motherhood, and consequently maternal images, with women as "essentialist," as reducing women and their responses to images to simple biology (pp. 27, 30). Following in the wake of much recent scholarship on motherhood—or parenting—in the Middle Ages, she stresses that maternity is a social role, a contingent construct built from social practices and expectations, rather than a physical or biological event.² The force of this argument becomes clear in the second half of the book as L'Estrange emphasizes the degree to which aristocratic men and women were interested in reproduction and so in images and practices relating to childbirth, not because of some biological imperative, but on account of their socially-constructed need for legitimate male heirs to perpetuate their dynasties. In her argument, social class is as important, if not

more important, than gender in shaping viewers' responses to images of holy motherhood.

While L'Estrange argues for including men as potential viewers of images of holy motherhood and as potential agents of a maternal "situational eye," she nevertheless recognizes that the primary viewers for these images and agents of this way of seeing were women. A second emphasis in her argument, therefore, is on the potential agency of female viewers and patrons within the patriarchal society of the later Middle Ages. L'Estrange writes that she is looking to move beyond what she terms an "empowerment vs. victim binary" in which medieval women are imagined as either entirely resistant to patriarchal norms or as entirely subjugated to them (pp. 27–28). Here again, her argument is in tune with much recent feminist work in medieval history and art history.³ The potential for female agency is a key concern in contemporary feminist art history, and a concern that seems to work against an active interest in medieval materials on the part of feminist art historians, for that agency is typically identified with the work of women artists, and yet so much of medieval art is the work of anonymous and presumably male makers. Identifying other forms of agency, in patronage and viewership, is crucial for the future vitality of feminist medievalist art history.⁴

L'Estrange finds that agency as medieval female viewers of images of holy motherhood were rendered "sensitive" to specific aspects of those images through their experiences with childbirth and were then able to use those images to "manage" their social roles and expectations (pp. 38–39 and *passim*). What exactly that "management" consisted of, however, remains rather vague throughout the first half of the book. It is clarified in the case studies in the second half. For example, in the case of Yolande of Aragon and her book of hours, now known as the Fitzwilliam Hours, L'Estrange argues that images of Christ's human lineage that emphasized the role of women as mothers in creating that lineage would have allowed Yolande to promote herself as the matriarch of a new Angevin holy lineage and so provided her with a source of authority (chapter 4, pp. 115–31). When that same book passed into the hands of Isabel Stuart, as the second wife of Francis of Brittany after Yolande of Aragon's daughter Yolande of Anjou, however, the images' significance would have shifted to reflect Isabel's need to provide her husband with a male heir, becoming a space for her to imagine and to pray for the fulfillment of that social expectation (chapter 5, pp. 201–205).

As an art historian, I find this book's most important contribution to be its emphasis on methodological considerations in the use of medieval images as historical sources for reconstructing women's lives and experiences. For an

interdisciplinary feminist medievalist audience, it serves as a salutary reminder that images do not provide unmediated access to the reality of past lives and so cannot be used as straightforward documentation of the past. To take one example from the book, L'Estrange points to previous scholarship that has used images of the Birth of the Virgin and of St. John the Baptist to document lying-in arrangements and practices. She acknowledges that there are strong correspondences between those images and textual sources on lying-in, but she uses those correspondences to consider the meanings that the images may have held for aristocratic lay women as their viewers. For instance, she argues that such viewers would have seen the fine furnishings in the images as “markers of estate” and so may have seen the images as promising the privileges they would enjoy as newly-delivered mothers (chapter 3, pp. 78–83). This change in perspective may seem minor, but it is crucial for understanding how medieval images functioned in their own contexts and so how they may serve today as sources for reconstructing medieval women’s experiences.

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NOTES

1. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972).

2. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, “Introduction” in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. x–xv; Naomi J. Miller, “Mothering Others: Caregiving as Spectrum and Spectacle in the Early Modern Period,” in *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Naomi Yavneh (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 1–8; also see the essays in both volumes.

3. Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2006), pp. 56–60.

4. Rachel Dressler, “Continuing the Discourse: Feminist Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Visual Culture,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 43.1 (2007): 15–34, pp. 19–20; also see the essays in the special section on “Feminist Approaches to Medieval Art and Visual Culture,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44.2 (2008): 47–143.

