

Susan Broomhall and Jennifer Spinks. *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries: Feminizing Sources and Interpretations of the Past.*

Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011. xiii + 248 pp. \$124.95. ISBN: 978-0-75460-6742-1.

The cover of this book features a photograph of a billboard in Leiden promoting the city's cultural heritage. The billboard reproduces a painting in the Lakenhaal museum that depicts women's involvement in the textile trades in the city. The modern use of the historical representation expresses the dual goals of this book: exploring women's lives in the early modern period, and suggesting ways that modern heritage sites can both be mined for such information and presented to bring awareness of women's roles in the past. The action described in the subheading, "Feminizing Sources and Interpretations," is the book's main aim: women in the Low Countries are the focus because of the special importance placed on them in this region's museums and cultural-heritage sites.

The authors define history as narratives that scholars have composed about the past. Their intention is to examine narratives that have been constructed around early modern women, and to offer alternatives. To reimagine these narratives the authors search out ego-documents reflective of women's lives. These they define more broadly than memoirs, diaries, letters, or other writings to include objects women owned or manipulated, spaces they lived in or altered, and landscapes that shaped their experience. The sources explored in their study reveal that the authors rely on the methods of art history and visual culture for their analysis.

The authors stretch the boundaries of historical analysis by analyzing how contemporary heritage sites and museums present women of the early modern Low Countries to modern audiences. Their approach is unusual in that it combines both the historian's questions about what we know and how we can know about women in the past, with insight gleaned from the versions of the past promoted in tourism and the heritage industry.

Across seven chapters the authors explore a variety of media, objects, and sites in case studies. Chapter 1 looks at elite women of the Burgundian court and considers how contemporary historians may recapture their concerns. A key text here is the description of Burgundian court protocol by Eleanor of Poitiers, which the authors read as expressing the value that Eleanor placed on these rituals and hierarchies. Acts of patronage by elite women are also read as ego-documents expressing women's values. Chapter 2 investigates Isaac van Swanenburg's series of paintings, produced in Leiden before 1612, depicting the Old and New Trades in that city (including the cover image). The authors root their convincing interpretation of this series in historical evidence about the cloth trade in Leiden. They call the billboard that quotes from this series the "triumph of a narrative" (71) that recognizes women's contributions to Leiden's economy. In chapter 3, the authors identify the contributions of the women of the Orange-Nassau house to the development of Holland's veneration of that dynasty, while noting that the presentations of Orange-Nassau men in museums and historical sites often erase the women.

Dolls' houses (*poppenhuizen*) collected by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch women are the focus of chapter 4. These items, the authors argue, though very popular with the museum-going public, have been treated by historians as less worthy of study than the objects collected by men, even when men also collected dolls' houses. The authors read these objects as expressing what was important to women in domestic life. Actual houses are analyzed in chapter 5, which compares the house of Rembrandt in Amsterdam and the house of Rubens in Antwerp as heritage sites and as sources of information about women's lives. Each site is staged to include the women associated with the artist; the authors read these curatorial decisions — through such evidence as signage and objects at the site — as narratives about women's roles.

The final two chapters focus on the ways that heritage sites address tourists with their own stories about early modern women: hospitals or Beguinages physically reconstruct the experience of early modern women, though often in a timeless and ahistorical fashion; images of Vermeer's women on tourist kiosks throughout Delft are there to signify the artist's genius. Gendered gift-shop merchandise and souvenirs aim to encourage contemporary women to identify with women of the past. The authors note that this focus on women is important for heritage sites and museums trying to attract visitors.

These observations tend to collapse the study of the past with its representation in the present. Heritage sites often enact scholarly interpretations; the sites affect scholars in turn, since they are also tourists, shaping the questions scholars ask. Encouraging scholars' awareness of this reciprocal influence is one of the goals of the book. Along with its postmodern methodology, the book uses evidence that is somewhat unusual for scholars of the Renaissance — at least in the sections that concern modern displays of the past — such as the relatively new fields of heritage and tourism studies. Still, the book also draws deeply from recent scholarship on women in early modern Northern Europe to offer much new insight and new questions worth pursuing. The book challenges historians to expand the materials they use to study women of the past, while challenging curators in the heritage sector to be alert to what they say about women in their own domains.

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