

John Block Friedman. *Brueghel's Heavy Dancers: Transgressive Clothing, Class, and Culture in the Late Middle Ages.*

Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010. xxviii + 361 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$45. ISBN: 978-0-8156-3215-3.

Medieval European societies comprised small urban or rural communities of often interrelated family clans, with strict social hierarchies. Daily life was almost always subject to continuous scrutiny and comment, while unconventional or 'deviant' behaviour was rarely tolerated, especially in dress. An ability for instinctive visual scrutiny, perhaps natural in an illiterate population devoid of much visual imagery (except that reserved for the sacred and the formal), may well account for what seems to us to be an obsessive fascination for observation. The fruit of this may be seen in narrative poetry and literature between 1200 and 1500 with all its fantasy, exaggeration, parody, and satire.

John Block Friedman offers us a fascinating glimpse into the world of the lower classes in late Medieval Europe, as viewed through the eyes of educated (male) writers and poets. Almost always recited aloud, their work was enjoyed by a small elite, educated audience. In part he ascribes such curiosity about the lives and behavior of the rural and urban lower classes to a renewal of interest in the works of classical writers such as Virgil and Ovid. By the fourteenth century, however, a more focused observation found expression in the *bergerie* genre. This provided greater social comment than the *pastourelle*. The former's entertaining descriptions of the perceived coarse lifestyle and humour of the manual classes are epitomized, for the author, in the painting of Peter Breughel the Elder (1525–69): “virtually every motif the painter uses . . . can be found in the poetry and art I will study, which were made a century earlier, and in certain cases two centuries earlier” (1).

Friedman suggests that transgressive clothing was largely a literary construct, but defines it in his introduction as the use of garments and accessories signifying a desire, “by a person of a lower social station to attain the status and perquisites of a higher class to which he is not entitled” (xiii). He then moves on to examine its apparent visual representation. It is here that the problems occur, at least from the point of view of a dress historian. One key example will suffice. Jean Fouquet's illumination of “The Meeting of St Margaret and the Prefect Olybrius” in *The Book of Hours of Etienne Chevalier* (9, fig. 4) is interpreted by Friedman as typically representing an amorous encounter usual in a *pastourelle*, between a knight and a shepherdess. He sees Fouquet depicting “a story of class: a familiar literary encounter between an aristocratic rider and a beautiful rustic” (8). But this is an illustration in a book of hours (written in Latin) for private religious devotion. It accompanies a prayer to St Margaret of Antioch and the artist has chosen carefully certain elements of dress very carefully to convey an important message about the life of the saint and martyr. In fact, Margaret has not yet seen or met the Prefect Olybrius who is shown in the background riding toward her and a small group of females with sheep grouped in the foreground. The three young girls sitting on the ground opposite Margaret, who stands spinning wool (not just holding a distaff), and Margaret herself, all have long, waist-length hair. For Friedman the long loose hair of the girls illustrates “their penchant for sensuality” (8). To think the artist could have intended any such meaning is anachronistic. Long, exposed hair was an appropriate signifier customarily identifying young females as virgins (that is, unmarried). In contrast a married woman is seen in profile standing behind St Margaret. Her hair is completely covered and wrapped with a linen cloth. Margaret is portrayed in a blue gown with a modest neckline and long sleeves with white turned-back cuffs, but Friedman erroneously implies that there might be something lascivious about her garb. He incorrectly describes her as dressed in “a *tightly fitted* fifteenth-century dress with an over-apron” (8, my emphasis). It is fitted, but neither tight nor covered with an apron: the fabric below the waist, hanging down over the sides of a red under-gown, is in fact the white lining of the skirt of her blue gown, the front of which is shown as pulled up, turned back, and pinned, or tucked in, at the waist. This was a common practice, allowing women with long skirts to

walk and to work more easily. Finally, Fouquet does not portray the young Margaret not in the humble garments of a shepherdess such as worn by her three companions, but in the well-made, brightly colored, clothes of an affluent bourgeoisie. St Margaret was of noble lineage, but disowned by her pagan father for converting to Christianity. Living with her adopted mother she helped out with rustic duties. Her origins, for the purposes of devotion, are signified by her clothing. It is not transgressive.

Friedman also has methodological problems when he uses comparative documentary information to interpret other imagery. A 1298 sumptuary law from Narbonne, prohibiting a side-laced female garment cannot be relevant to images of front or side-laced Frenchwomen's garments depicted over 200 years later, as for instance in "The Temptation of St Anthony" from the *Hours of Louis de Laval*, ca. 1480 (35, fig. 6), or in an illumination from the *Livre de simples medicines* ca. 1450 (36, fig. 7). In the latter a female bran-maker is being seized by an assailant. He is not "wearing a *doublet* with many transgressive buttons" (34, my emphasis), but a jacket (or short over gown). Its many buttons for closure were quite usual at this date. But he is depicted as disreputable, since he has a beard, a contemporary signifier used, as in this case, to indicate a person with criminal intent. In contrast the woman is very respectable. The underarm lateral lacing of her gown is no more lascivious than today's ubiquitous zipper. More important as a potential indicator of transgression would be the area between the base of her neck and the neckline of her gown, as well as her hair, but both are completely covered, indicating her modesty and innocence.

It is not always the case, as the author assumes when discussing the eroticism of the chemise, that "in sumptuary law and in manuscript illumination such visible underwear and laced bodices are specifically associated with lust and temptation" (34). Lacing was a very common way of closing men's and women's garments. For females it enabled expansion and contraction when required, especially during pregnancy. Piero della Francesca, for example, depicts the *Virgin of Childbirth* (ca. 1467, Cemetery chapel, Monterchi, Arezzo) wearing a blue gown fastened with both front and side-lacing, as does Cosimo Tura in his allegorical painting of the *Muse Calliope* (ca. 1455–60, The National Gallery, London).

When discussing potential bridal gifts for Castilian country girls as described in Juan de Ruiz's *Libro de Buen Amor* (1330–43) it is difficult to understand how Friedman assumes they were "appropriate to a woman of higher station . . . and show the transgressivity of . . . desire for wedding costume" (114–15), because he provides no corroborative documentary information from fourteenth-century Castile. But is interesting that the desirable trousseaux, whether for a shepherdess engaged in logging or a girl herding cattle, contain almost identical items that are both festive and practical (109, 113). They comprise a scarlet ribbon for the hair, a sheepskin jacket (*zamarra/camoron*), tin and brass jewellery, a short-sleeved sleeved over-coat (*garnacha*, generally worn for travel), and boots. Both girls also request a coif or bonnet (*toca*, a head covering) made of striped fabric.

It is puzzling that Friedman believes that the social status of the Miller and the Squire's Yeoman in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is truly that of poor countrymen ("villagers"), and that the Miller posed "a threat to the cultural hegemony of the aristocracy" (176). An English yeoman was a freeborn man owning land worth at least forty shillings, and thus of reasonably high status. He was required to own and carry weapons, was eligible to vote for Parliament, might even become a knight, and was exempt from certain sumptuary laws. On the other hand, he might also be engaged in a commercial activity such as milling, or take service with a man of higher rank.

There is much to commend this book. It introduces many new areas of interest and insights from a great variety of medieval literature. It also attempts to address problems of interpretation in dress history and theory that few authors have tackled. But in this case, literary analysis needs to run hand in hand with art history, appropriately supportive documentary evidence, and archaeological method, otherwise its virtues risk being lost in the mire of erroneous over-interpretation.

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