

The Strait Gate: Thresholds and Power in Western History. Daniel Jütte.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. viii + 376 pp. \$40.

In this well-researched and engaging study, the author seeks to draw our attention to a neglected topic: the multifaceted roles of doors and gates in European culture. He succeeds. Presented with an impressive range of evidence from ancient Egypt to the virtual communities of the present, readers gain a differentiated understanding of the significance of the phenomenon. How exactly it evolved over the course of time forms one of the fascinating — and equally complex — issues examined in five complementary chapters.

Supported by an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources as well as thirty-seven apposite illustrations (which, laudably, come with illuminating captions and enlarged reproductions of the most important details), the argument moves on many levels and in different directions. Above all, we learn that doors were not just functional (even though the experience of being locked out could — and can — be very frustrating in purely practical terms). Entering was/is governed by manifold cultural conventions; salvation ideas focused on moments of admission (to heaven), temporary allocation (to purgatory), or dismissal (to hell); multiple legal proceedings and ecclesiastical ceremonies (such as

marriages) took place in front of portals; shaming rituals, protective magic, and communication processes involved doors; the possession of keys provided patriarchs, city magistrates, clergymen, and princes with tangible attributes of power; passing through entrances or exits formed part of liminal experiences and acts of inclusion/exclusion; and, last but not least, city gates equipped burghers with a sense of protection and a source of collective identity. In short, “the historian must take into account that the door is above all a social and cultural convention” (10).

Early modernists are among the foremost beneficiaries of this study. Pointing to concerns about domestic possessions, the safety of inhabitants, and official instructions, the author challenges widespread assumptions that front doors tended to be left open in that period. There are also extended reflections on the dissemination of news, legislation, and libels through the “bulletin boards” of doors in premodern Europe, although Jütte stops short of pronouncing on whether Luther really posted his Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church. The two weightiest claims relate to intercultural differences and chronological change: that doors have always been more prominent in Western than, say, Japanese society and that, overall, their importance has declined in the modern world. Further research will be needed to test both judgements, but a few preliminary comments may be attempted here. Does the book overstate the divisive function of doors for earlier times? Were city and countryside not much more closely intertwined than the passages on town gates suggest? On the other hand, are we really less aware of doors in the present? True, many now open automatically, but new thresholds — such as those of trendy clubs reserved for select patrons or of airport gates channeling long-distance journeys — have surfaced instead. On English streets flanked by terraced houses, furthermore, doors remain the only distinctive features of an otherwise uniform environment. In any case, as Jütte rightly emphasizes, “the entrances that capture our attention” nowadays “tend to be virtual” (256), i.e., the digital keys required for free movement within the internet.

Inevitably, some aspects (like the role of internal doors) cannot be covered in a book of this length and — even though the regional horizon is admirably broad — there is a certain bias toward German-speaking lands. Overall, however, *The Strait Gate* can be warmly recommended, both as a survey of an original topic in its own right and as a thought-provoking example of the new cultural history more generally.

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