

L'Estrange, Elizabeth. *Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. Pp. 282. \$84.00. ISBN: 9780719075438.

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In an argument articulated with exceptional clarity, Elizabeth L'Estrange identifies the significance to a particular group of late medieval reader-viewers of a specific subject that occurred repeatedly in their manuscripts' miniatures. The reader-viewers are members of the houses of Anjou, Brittany, and France, and the subject is a birth scene, that of a holy or heroic child. To accomplish this analysis L'Estrange develops her own methodology, an approach to spectatorship she calls situational viewing. This revision of Michael Baxandall's "period eye" takes multiple factors, especially gender, class, and social position into account. This generally successful approach contributes significantly both to our understanding of the reception of a number of important late medieval manuscripts, among them the *Rohan Hours*, and to the repertoire of theoretical approaches suited to our objects of study.

Holy Motherhood contains five chapters grouped into two major parts. The first, entitled "Gender, Agency, and the Interpretation of Material Culture" sets out both L'Estrange's general approach to the gendered viewing of medieval visual culture and the specific cultural context through which her reader-viewers would have approached miniatures of birth scenes. In Part II, "Manuscript Case Studies from the Houses of Anjou, Brittany and France," the focus shifts to analysis of birth images in specific books and the situational viewing of their aristocratic patrons and users.

After a brief introduction providing an overview of late medieval birth scenes and the central importance of the Holy Kinship, especially its central figure, Saint Anne, as well as chapter summaries, L'Estrange turns to viewing practices in Chapter 1, "The Situational Eye: Viewing, Gender and Response in the Later Middle Ages." She asks the double-edged question: does a work of art featuring images of holy motherhood justify the conclusions that its patron was a woman and its female viewers had agency, or do such works primarily reinforce the subjugated position of a married woman within a patriarchal society? As a way out of the methodological impasse created by this double-bind, she turns to Adrian Randolph's reformulation of Baxandall's concept of the "period eye." Although he understood response to visual images as conditioned by both experience and socially acquired habits of interpretation, Baxandall's viewer was a fifteenth-century merchant. Randolph altered this concept for the female viewer, valorizing her agency even within patriarchy, but at the cost of creating distinct male and female categories of spectatorship. Considering social roles rather than sex, L'Estrange focuses on the "agent of the situational eye." Thus she can analyze images of holy motherhood from the perspective of those concerned with producing healthy (preferably male) heirs.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the factors, the cognitive habits, that informed the situational eye as it viewed images of childbirth.

Chapter 2, "*De conceptione ad partem: Saints, Treatises and Prayers for Successful Childbirth*," focuses on the social practices prospective parents could access to increase their chances of positive outcomes, beginning with treatises on conception, and shows that "women, as well as men, took active steps to help them become the parents that their social positions required" (49). Primary documents discussed here include a treatise on fertility commissioned by Gaston IV, Count of Foix, and a treatise, *On Conception and Generation, Especially of Male Children*, written by the French royal physician in 1488, presumably for Anne of France. L'Estrange then turns to prayers for labor, which occur in Books of Hours made for women (as well as other places) and frequently name the women of the Holy Kinship as well as biblical mothers. Amulets invoke the same narratives, creating a situation in which a woman in labor, as well as those assisting her in the birth room, are brought "into the collective of holy mothers blessed by God" (56). Such women "could use and appropriate patriarchal narratives for the execution of their social roles without necessarily being disempowered" (67).

From Chapter 2's focus on labor, Chapter 3 moves on to "The Lying-In Month and the Rite of Churching: Post-Partum Rituals and the Material Culture of Child-Bearing." This richly documented chapter opens with a 1430 letter from Marguerite of Burgundy to her sister-in-law Isabel of Portugal, which is filled with advice about preparing for lying-in and churching. It provides specific details about beds and hangings (including colors), the number of rooms needed, the images to be painted on the cradle, and the duchess's dress for the churching ceremony, all practices that "form another part of the cultural training that informed the situational eye" (77). Citing the work of Adrian Wilson and Paula Rieder on churching rituals that brings out the multivalency of purification practices--establishing the polluted body of the new mother but making her a central figure both in the household and the religious rite--L'Estrange focuses here on images of the Purification of the Virgin, as well as of the birth of the Virgin and of John the Baptist. She shows that the material culture on display in these images correlates with that elaborated in primary documents such as Marguerite's letter, or a treatise by Eleanor of Poitier describing the lying-in of Isabel of Bourbon in 1456. This chapter also documents men's involvement in the social practices of the household after childbirth and argues that their familiarity with such practices informed the situational eye with which they might, then, interpret images of holy motherhood in terms of their own circumstances.

The diverse materials explored in Part I provide a firm foundation and rich context for the "Manuscript Case Studies from the Houses of Anjou, Brittany, and France" that form Part II of L'Estrange's study. These begin with Chapter 4 "Holy Mothers, Sainted Monarchs, and *beata stirps*: The *Fitzwilliam Hours* and Books of Hours for the House of Anjou." The manuscript central to this chapter is better known as the *Hours of Isabella Stuart*, a title L'Estrange avoids, presumably because her emphasis falls on the succession of Angevin and Breton duchesses who owned the manuscript, of whom Isabella Stuart was only one. She begins by establishing the situation of the house of Anjou in the early fifteenth century, focusing on the able and active duchess, Yolande of Aragon. For L'Estrange, Yolande was "highly aware of the importance of marriage and children, especially sons, in resolving political and territorial problems" (118), and was instrumental in the marriage of her daughter Marie to Charles of Ponthieu, who became dauphin of France in 1417. Reviewing the evidence within the manuscript for female patronage L'Estrange identifies Yolande as the commissioner of this luxury book from the Rohan Workshop and accepts the date proposed by a number of scholars, ca. 1418. Based on the

concept of the *beata stirps* (blessed lineage) that was adopted by a number of noble families in the Middle Ages, L'Estrange finds further evidence for Yolande's patronage in the combination of emphasis on the Holy Kinship (especially Saint Anne, matriarch of Jesus's lineage) and saints that form a Franco-Angevin *beata stirps* (Radegund, Elizabeth of Hungary, Louis IX, and Louis of Toulouse), in the illustrated suffrages of the *Fitzwilliam Hours*.

Awareness of the concept of *beata stirps* would have been, L'Estrange argues, central to the "socially-constructed situational eye" (113) with which Yolande of Aragon's daughter, Yolande of Anjou, interpreted the images in the *Fitzwilliam Hours*, assuming her mother gave it to her as a wedding gift when she became duchess of Brittany in 1431. In this section L'Estrange focuses on an unusual feature of this manuscript, the marginal images illustrating scenes from the three Pilgrimage poems of Guillaume de Digulleville and the Apocalypse, subject of a recent study by Richard K. Emmerson ("A 'Large Order of the Whole': Intertextuality and Interpictoriality in the Hours of Isabella Stuart," *Studies in Iconography* 28 (2007): 53-99). L'Estrange argues strongly for Yolande's familiarity with these frequently illustrated texts, providing evidence that they circulated among the French nobility, especially her own Angevin family. However, in her desire to see Yolande's response to the images in the *Fitzwilliam Hours* as one aligning her own imperative toward motherhood with that of the Virgin, she has failed to note their relationship to the specifics of Guillaume's text. For example, on the opening in the manuscript containing the beginning of John's Gospel, the text is flanked by two marginal images: the Annunciation on folio 13v and what L'Estrange terms "Joseph Presented to Mary" on 14r. L'Estrange argues that "the inclusion of Joseph and the juxtaposition of the two images serve to anchor Mary's God-given motherhood in the secular world of marriage that would be recognizable to contemporary lay people" (137). Close examination of the second miniature reveals that its subject is actually Joseph apologizing to Mary at Gabriel's urging, a scene vividly enacted in Guillaume's poem and illustrated in a number of its manuscripts in a composition from which the *Fitzwilliam Hours* miniature surely derives. The text on folio 14r insists that Jesus is the son of God and was not born from the lusts of the flesh, which is what Gabriel tells Joseph in Guillaume's poem when he upbraids Joseph for planning to abandon Mary.

L'Estrange similarly misinterprets the next marginal image in the *Fitzwilliam Hours*, a scene of Mary adoring the Child while Joseph interacts with a woman who stretches her arms out toward the nude infant. She writes, "Joseph's gesture towards the woman, as if welcoming her or imploring her help, and the way the woman gestures with both hands over the fence towards Mary and Christ, provide a secular aspect to this birth scene in the same way that popular late-medieval plays also often gave the biblical stories human and contemporary touches by having Joseph send for a midwife to help his wife in labour, or having Mary visited by her mother and sisters" (137-38). Guillaume's is, however, an allegorical poem, and the woman here is a personification of Nature, who has come to protest the "unnatural" birth and to advise Joseph to abandon Mary at once, a scene illustrated in a number of Digulleville manuscripts. Made in Paris during the time when Jean Gerson was actively campaigning for Joseph's addition to the calendar of saints, the *Fitzwilliam Hours* does not include Joseph so much to add "a human, secular touch to the narrative of the Incarnation" (139), as to provide the viewer's situational eye with the delight and satisfaction of recognizing the parallels between the Gospel texts and Guillaume's idiosyncratic narration. I hasten to add that this is not a general fault of the book, for elsewhere L'Estrange attends carefully to texts and, in fact, in appendices, edits and translates two

unpublished prayers, one from the *Hours of Marguerite of Foix* in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the other from the *Prayer Book of Anne of Brittany* in the Newberry Library.

Readings of a number of other images in the *Fitzwilliam Hours* convincingly evoke the interpretations likely to have been reached through Yolande of Anjou's situational eye. Folio 29r, for example, with its large miniature of the Annunciation and seven marginal scenes from the life of the Virgin, with "its celebration of the sanctity of marriage, the God-given gift of children, the role of women, in particular, in generating a holy lineage and educating their children" (139), offered the newly married Yolande a space for meditating on her social role as duchess expected to continue the Angevin *beata stirps*. Such readings support L'Estrange's argument that the "intertextualities and intervisualities between images and material culture came together through the situational eye in ways that did not necessarily reduce the woman to the role of passive recipient but instead allowed her to harness the images and practices available to her for the better management of her life" (150).

Moving on to male viewers, but continuing to examine books related to the house of Anjou, L'Estrange considers next the potential responses of Charles of Ponthieu and René of Anjou to the maternal and dynastic subjects she finds in the *Rohan Hours* and in two *Hours of René of Anjou*. Her argument is based on an important essay by James Marrow showing that a group of manuscripts made for the Duke of Berry and members of his family exhibit a "historical and dynastic consciousness" (151) that can function to strengthen family ties and resolve.

L'Estrange follows the scholarship suggesting that the *Rohan Hours* was commissioned by Yolande of Aragon as a gift for her son-in-law, the future Charles VII. Her focus is on the extensive marginal cycle from the *Bible moralisée*, a highly unusual feature that suggests a royal reader, and within that cycle, on its images of holy childbirth. In her view, the theme of holy lineage established by the marginal cycle could function both to remind Charles of his need for heirs and of "the conjunction of Old Testament genealogical narratives with those of the house of France" (167). L'Estrange's interpretation of this cycle makes a major contribution towards the understanding of this complex manuscript.

Yolande of Aragon's son, René of Anjou, had an extensive manuscript collection; L'Estrange focuses on two books of hours, neither made for him, but both personalized for him through the addition of miniatures. Episodes in René's life would have made him sensitive to the birth narratives in these family manuscripts "as reminders of his illustrious lineage, its holiness and proximity to that of Christ, and his social obligations to engender heirs for the survival of his family and duchy" (187).

Chapter 5, "*Steriles fecundas fecisti: Viewing and Reading Holy Motherhood in the Manuscripts of Four Duchesses of Brittany*," returns to the *Fitzwilliam Hours*, inherited by Isabel Stuart when she married Francis, later Duke of Brittany, widowed by the death of Yolande of Anjou, and later passed on, L'Estrange assumes, to Isabel's daughter, Marguerite of Brittany. The focus of the first part of the chapter is on the childbearing difficulties of this mother and daughter, specifically the problems of each of their houses caused by the lack of male heirs, and their own failures to resolve those problems. These women must have seen hopeful parallels in the childbirth images in their manuscript as well as models for the creation of a *beata stirps*.

L'Estrange turns to other books commissioned by Isabel after the death of her husband to demonstrate her commitment to Brittany. For her daughter Marguerite, the images of holy motherhood in the *Fitzwilliam Hours* might also have "symboliz[ed] the *difficulties* of carrying out her social duties, and her failure to receive the blessing that God had bestowed upon other women" (218).

At this point my reading of L'Estrange's book was rendered difficult by a flaw in the production process: my copy has seventeen entirely blank pages between pages 219 and 249, the second half of Chapter 5, and one more in the conclusion. It is regrettable that this carelessness means I cannot provide a summary of the analysis of the *Hours of Marguerite of Foix* or of Anne of Brittany's *Prayer Book*.

Among the strengths of this book is the author's clear articulation of her own positions. Further, generous illustration in the form of sixteen very good color plates and fifty-two black and white figures made possible by a publication subvention from the Medieval Academy of America enables the reader to evaluate L'Estrange's interpretations. Throughout, she identifies the importance of images of holy motherhood in the manuscripts she examines and works to maintain complexity in positing the responses of their fifteenth-century owners. In a strong conclusion, she brings together her arguments and findings. In her own summarizing words, "Images of holy motherhood and miraculous childbirth should, therefore, be considered multivalent, altering or oscillating in meaning for different viewers at different times in their lives, rather than as inherently prescriptive or empowering" (255).