

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Claudia Goldstein, *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party*
(Farnham: Ashgate, 2013). 188pp. ISBN 978 0 7546 6732 2.**

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Much has been written about Pieter Bruegel from various critical points of view. Some think of the painter as a moralist who created lessons to be taken to heart. Others see him as a spinner of classical and biblical allusions, puzzles to be solved. Still others find his depictions of peasant scenes mainly intended to evoke laughter. Claudia Goldstein's admirable study of dinner parties in Antwerp understands the artwork within the domestic settings of its purchasers as objects marking status. Goldstein does not dismiss other sorts of interpretation, though these are not her main concern. Using a strongly archival approach focusing on inventories and other documents, Goldstein finds that dining rooms allowed owners to display their most important objects, especially paintings. Dinner parties were key social, political, and business events of the time.

A case study central to Goldstein's book involves the bankruptcy of Jan Noirot, who was master of the Mint in Antwerp. The bankruptcy occurred in 1572 but followed a downward spiral of Noirot's wealth and the selling off of his household goods generally. What is most significant is that Noirot owned a choice set of Breugels including a *Peasant Wedding*, a *Peasant Kermis*, and a depiction of *Winter*. Also included in the inventory were decorated jugs, *kruken*, along with salt cellars and a variety of items related to eating. The paintings were kept in Noirot's dining room, which is where they were when he absconded, leaving his wife with no financial support and the Mint with the task of selling his valuables. Although the household had not been able to put on a dinner party for years, Noirot kept up appearances to the last by displaying the Breugels in the dining room. Telling and memorable anecdotes of this sort are scattered throughout the book.

Goldstein goes into detail about the locations of dining spaces, pointing out that often there was a large dining room, or *grote zaal*, connected to one which was smaller, the *klein zaal*.

Certainly this is the case with the home of Jerome de Buysleyden, a patron of the arts and friend of Erasmus. Erasmus, it would seem, wrote his 'Feast of Many Courses' against a background of actual dinner parties. Dinner party literature extends back to the time of Plato and is dominated by the presence of men, but actual practice in Antwerp frequently included women, who are mentioned in letters that passed between Lancelot van Ussel, a city magistrate, and the notary Jan Gillis. In addition to hearing gossip and arranging business deals, guests were treated to *tafelspelen*, little plays which were performed during the meal. Foolish peasants were frequently the characters in these playlets, so that there would have been a correspondence if not an irony generated by the interaction of what was performed and what was hung on the walls. The players seem to have been members of the Rhetoricians Guild and the *tafelspelen* comic as well as scatological. Goldstein situates her discussion of the dinner guests within theories of performance and asserts that the guests, themselves, were both performers and audience.

Jan Noirot was a member of the moneyed class that was located just below the nobility and that included another high-ranking Mint officer, Joris Veselaer. Veselaer owned an extensive collection of oil paintings but also a chest, which Goldstein believes was a *kunstkabinet*. The chest contained Dürer prints, Gossaert drawings, and numerous small sculptures in plaster and stone. He owned a larger copper statue of Cleopatra, an unusual subject according to Goldstein. The Mint, it turns out, was a major node of art collecting.

This book will be of great interest to art historians of course, but it is likely have a wider readership. Historians of material culture in England, for instance, will be able to compare objects in Antwerp with what was to be seen across the Channel. Some scholars have been curious about why Bess of Hardwick chose to display a painted cloth of Cleopatra along with three other cloths picturing virtuous women when Cleopatra was generally understood to be a seductress. Perhaps Veselaer's Cleopatra will help to explain what Bess had in mind and why she placed her Cleopatra cloth in the servants' hall, another eating area.

Those who study English Renaissance drama will be able to discuss the morally ambivalent nature of Shakespeare's Egyptian queen with this additional piece of evidence. Finally, the best-known comedy of Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure*, contains a play within a play with which aristocratic ladies are entertained, but with a difference. In *Convent*, the little play does not merely make light of people from the lower classes, as is the case with the *tafelspelen*. Rather, Cavendish also offers a mix of pathos and a brutal sort of humour. Cavendish, of course, lived in Antwerp during the Interregnum, as did many other English aristocrats.

Goldstein is mindful of the limitations inherent in using inventories. That certain sorts of items were not listed therein, as she notes, does not mean that they were not present before the inventories were made. It is undoubtedly a quibble but, I would have liked to have seen a little more judicious speculation about this issue. Might Noirot have spirited away any paintings as he precipitously departed from his home? Goldstein must have created some useful lists of paintings and other objects from inventories. I would have been delighted if ten to twenty pages of tables from these lists had been included in her book, tables in the manner of John Michael Montias's tables seen in articles in *Simiolus*. That said, Goldstein's book was a pleasure to read and will be widely consulted by scholars in a variety of fields.