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Richardson, Todd M. Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands

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collection off with an expert reading of Italian cases of demonic possession and exorcism in the context of Counter-Reformation legal institutions before the promulgation of the *Rituale Romanum*.

STUART CLARK, *College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University*

Richardson, Todd M.

Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Art Discourse in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands.

Visual Culture in Early Modernity. Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011. Pp. xi, 268. ISBN 978-0-7546-6816-9 (hardback) \$119.95.

Todd Richardson's book makes a number of contributions to the currently burgeoning field of Bruegel studies—and to the discussion of northern Renaissance art in general. His most important inquiry, perhaps, has to do with notions of the vernacular in Flemish art, a concept introduced by scholars like David Freedberg and Mark Meadow. Richardson offers a nuanced examination of two written texts that have figured heavily in this discussion: a Latin eulogy to Bruegel by his friend, the well-known cosmographer Abraham Ortelius, and a Flemish invective against a “certain painter” by the polyglot poet and artist Lucas de Heere. Richardson convincingly shows that neither document should be taken as evidence of a local/Italianate divide in the art theory of the Low Countries. Richardson profitably examines the status of Netherlandish poetry by Lucas de Heere and Jan van der Noot, its two most sophisticated practitioners who quite self-consciously attempted to fashion compelling vernacular verse. The author points to their study of Clément Marot and the poets of the *Pléiade*, especially Pierre de Ronsard and Joachim Du Bellay, who had earlier set about transforming the French language into a suitable vehicle for poetic expression. All of these writers saw the relation between vernacular and Latin verse to be subtle and complex, much more than a simple opposition. Richardson brings these findings to his discussion of de Heere's invective, demonstrating the improbability that the poet intended a reductive opposition between a local Flemish style of painting and a grand Italianate manner. According to Richardson, de Heere does not criticize this “certain painter” because “his style

is not Italianate, but rather that he did not take the opportunity to learn from Italian methods to enrich his own practice" (47).

Richardson next addresses the types of discussions likely held over pictures in the private collections of Antwerp's elite. Drawing on the research of Claudia Goldstein, he places particular importance on the fact that the paintings by Bruegel and other notables were likely hung in dining rooms. This finding leads to a discussion of the conventions of table talk, of the model of the *convivium* promoted by Erasmus and many others, and its significance as prototype for actual conversation.

Additional chapters treat Bruegel's large and monumental depictions of peasants. Richardson maintains that these pictures can be seen as a local and personal translation of the *historia*, the term Alberti and other Italian theorists used to designate narrative painting that privileged the presentation of the human body. The author sketches the reception of Alberti's treatise in Northern Europe but devotes the most space to an analysis of Bruegel's compositional techniques and his reliance on canonical images by Raphael and Michelangelo among others. Large panels like Bruegel's *Peasant Dance* and *Peasant Wedding Feast*, Richardson argues, are perhaps the most illuminating and erudite register of attitudes towards the vernacular in Netherlandish art. They contradict any assumption of an overall rejection of the Italianate *lingua franca* practised by painters like Frans Floris (and cherished by de Heere). Rather, they demonstrate a conscious synthesis of local culture and the grand Italian manner. Richardson further suggests that Bruegel's informed audience would have recognized the formal references and appreciated the often ironic reliance on celebrated religious images. This approach figures heavily in Richardson's interpretation of Bruegel's *Peasant and Nest Robber*. The author argues that audiences would have noted Bruegel's dependence on Italian pictures of John the Baptist pointing to "he who shall come after me." The biblical subject of these prototypes was very much an aspect of the response of Bruegel's viewers, Richardson insists.

A few other suggestions are, perhaps, more debatable. Richardson asserts that Bruegel's inclusion of a classical building in the background of his engraving of the Festival of Fools is an adherence to notions of decorum as followed by Floris and Hans Vredeman de Vries. I would say, however, that the building in Bruegel's print does not look very classical. It seems to be a rather inventive version of festive architecture: a circular, sheltered, and open-air structure

for dancing and other social activities. Its ornament is poorly defined, and its reference to buildings like the Colosseum or the Arena of Verona seems problematic. If there is a knowing glance to classical edifices, it seems, once again, to be heavily ironic and not an obeisance to established conventions of decorum. Strangely, Bruegel's most likely reference to prestigious architecture as espoused by Vredeman de Vries is found in his engraving of *Spring*—not in the buildings in the distance but rather in the design of the garden attended to by peasants. The artful segmentation and definition of the garden space reminds one of Vredeman's own book of gardens, in which the plans of the verdant grounds conform to the classical orders.

There are other issues concerning the idea of the vernacular that might be further elaborated. For one thing, Netherlandish painters had been adapting aspects of Italian art for half a century by the time Bruegel executed his large panels of peasants. Indeed, Bruegel's monumental figure style seems most indebted, not to the contemporary Italianate pictures of Floris or Willem Key, but to those of the previous generation of "Romanists," especially Bernard van Orley. Van Orley's large and somewhat ungainly protagonists, both in paintings and designs for tapestries, presage Bruegel's peasants most closely. Bruegel's interest in Raphael seems to be partly mediated by van Orley's compositions, as it was by Holbein's biblical narratives on the printed page.

Richardson notes this longer process in passing when considering Pieter Aertsen's apparent citation of a Leonardesque motif, a boy's head, originally of the infant Christ, introduced decades earlier by Joos van Cleve. Aertsen's insertion of this detail may or may not be a self-reflexive act, but it is of a piece with the gradual but persistent assimilation of Italian pictorial features by Netherlandish painters who devoted considerable attention precisely to the depiction of themes drawn from local folklore or experience. Quentin Massys's *Unequal Couple* of around 1520 already shows a self-conscious adaptation of Leonardesque facial types. The tavern scenes of Jan van Hemessen, painted around twenty years later, show in their plastic articulations of the human form an attention to Italian conventions. Aertsen, a decade or so still later, demonstrates much the same approach. Antwerp especially had long been a cosmopolitan cultural centre, and its artists were exposed to a variety of international artistic trends. *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* by Frans Floris, that exemplum of the Italianate mode in Antwerp, was partly based on the compositions of the German Albrecht Dürer.

Richardson's study is an imaginative and productive investigation of aspects central to Pieter Bruegel's work. In particular, its investigation of literary parallels in differing cultural milieus (the *Pléiade* and de Heere, Erasmus and Neo-Latin literature, the Dutch *Rederijkers*) is extremely useful and offers new insights into notions of vernacular art.

ETHAN MATT KAVALER, *University of Toronto*

Zlatar, Antoinina Bevan.

Reformation Fictions: Polemical Protestant Dialogues in Elizabethan England.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. x, 239. ISBN 978-0-19-960469-2 (hardcover) £60.

Describing her study as “an unashamedly interdisciplinary project, situated between cultural history and historicist literary criticism” (7), Antoinina Bevan Zlatar surveys some twenty polemical Protestant dialogues published in Elizabethan England. These generically hybrid works, she argues, have rarely been read on their own terms, being dismissed on the one hand by literary critics as thinly fictionalized propaganda, and mined on the other hand by historians digging for evidence of Reformation thought. She therefore seeks to “rehabilitate” these dialogues as a group and as a genre, “for the first time giving them a literary, historicist, and, to a lesser extent, theological reading” (v).

A brief (nine-page) introduction—chapter 1—and even briefer (five-page) conclusion frame six relatively short chapters. Chapter 2 gives background to the polemical dialogue as a didactic genre anchored in a rhetorical conception of literature. Zlatar identifies some sources and analogues (sermons, catechisms, interludes) and notes the genre's characteristic if sporadic engagements with satire, topicality, colloquialism, theatricality, and fictive self-awareness. The foundational text in this account is Erasmus's *Colloquies*. Zlatar reserves discussion of the influence of earlier Reformation polemic until chapter 3, which notes formal and other continuities between Henrician, Edwardian, and Marian-era Protestant dialogues (including those by writers such as William Turner, Luke Shepherd, and John Bale) and their Continental Reformation