

Susan Mosher Stuard. *Gilding the Market: Luxury and Fashion in Fourteenth-Century Italy.* (The Middle Ages.) University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. Pp. viii + 322.

THE SOCIETY FOR Medieval Feminist Scholarship's recent celebration of Susan Mosher Stuard as a "Foremother" focused, naturally enough, on her invaluable contributions to the history of medieval women, yet this most recent of her major works pulls together strands from across her wide-ranging scholarly career to weave a sumptuous cultural, economic, and social history of Italian taste for fashionable clothes and luxury goods in the fourteenth century.

Fashion has always walked a fine line between good taste and absurdity: "If the fourteenth-century fashionable could have seen themselves!" (p. 1). The lack of full-length mirrors before the mid-fifteenth century meant little self-conscious awareness of just how one (presuming that "one" was a man) looked in the latest short tunic, parti-colored hose, floppy hat, pointy shoes, and jangling metal ornaments. This first phase in the history of fashion was "blatantly obvious and adamantly garish" (p. 1) and would be toned down with the more austere tastes of the fifteenth century. Fashion was still a new phenomenon in the early fourteenth century (though its material, technological, and market underpinnings had been around for some decades) and was viewed by contemporary merchants as helping create hungry and lucrative markets for the goods they sought to purvey, notably fine fabrics and precious metals. Changing styles in clothes and the desire for other luxury goods are important elements in medieval economic histories. Fashion and luxury fed both the supply and demand sides of markets as craftspeople and merchants dreamed up ever newer ways to create with silk and silver, and consumers endlessly renewed their hunger for "making a stir," especially in personal appearance.

Gilding the Market offers several interlinked arguments, chiefly that fashion and other forms of luxury consumption were not an elite preserve but were enjoyed by various groups within the middle ranks of urban societies, who played key roles in the establishment and consolidation of capitalist economies. Luxury consumption enhanced the wealth of those making and selling the goods and gave middle-rank consumers desirable commodities on which to spend their money. The goods consumed helped improve consumers' social position through "leveling upward." However, Stuard dispels some older scholarly orthodoxies about the top-down influence of fashion by insisting on a distinction between fashion and style. Style was the mode of personal attire approved in courtly context and was strongly influenced by the sartorial choices of the ruler. It was too lavish to be imitated except by an elite few and was slow to

change. Fashion, in contrast, constantly sought novelty; it “turned playful at the least excuse while court style was construed as a solemn exhibition of power and authority” (p. 224). She also contends against the view that fashion is necessarily implicated in the creation of individualism, seeing medieval players as driven more by the contemporary urge to express corporate spirit. Lacking full-length mirrors, they were more interested in their reflections in the men and women they saw walking about their neighbourhoods. Moreover, disputing simplistic models of class envy such as Werner Sombart’s theory of fashion as merely a “bourgeois replica” of court style, Stuard shows how less affluent urbanites could take part in the fashion phenomenon through cheaper materials, budget knockoffs, the secondhand market, or their own skills. Women, in particular, adapted to the new era through crafty employment of needle skills. Fashion proved to be “a slippery business” (p. 220) perennially beyond the control of male patricians who would have preferred to reserve it for themselves.

Stuard’s analysis of sumptuary laws in chapters 3 and 4 offers the most sustained opportunity for gender analysis. She joins with many recent scholars in demonstrating that fashion was a masculine business. Careful attention to cut, color, fit, materials, and accessories was essential to any man looking to assert his “gravitas and authority” in the urban environment. A gulf lies between these “merchant princes” in their glittering attire and modern leaders in somber suits. As lawmakers they sought to create sartorial privilege for themselves through limiting the choices of young men, girls, and women. Fashion did not, contrary to some modern assumptions, feminize men; on the contrary, it masculinized women. Attempts to control women’s dress were repeatedly thwarted by women’s own determination, dexterity with a needle, and cunning exploitation of legal loopholes. “Officials might insist, ‘You cannot wear those buttons,’ to which the woman answered, ‘Yes sir, I can, because they are not buttons but beads as they lack button holes’” (p. 85). Yet lawmakers persisted, unwilling to give up on their vision of a seemingly social order where women and the young were properly subordinate. Simple notions of rank, however, do not help us as much as is often thought. Noble lawmakers in Venice licensed their non-noble male peers to dress as finely as they did, thus protecting the market in luxury textiles and attire that kept them all wealthy. The Italian focus on women, youths, and children was not a feature of sumptuary laws in all European contexts. In England, for example, the greatest attention was paid to gentlemen and merchants—peers of the very men who in Italian cities looked to protect their own position. Stuard does not engage in cross-cultural comparisons of this sort, but they add further weight to her cautions against simplistic interpretations of sumptuary legislation.

Luxury could be a burden as much as a pleasure. The urge to lavishness exerted financial pressures. Fourteenth-century consumers had to deal with war, plague, bank collapses, and the late fourteenth-century bullion famine. Yet Stuard contends that the fashion impulse helped stave off the worst of the late-century depression by stimulating demand. Another of fashion's drawbacks is the stress of the necessity to keep up appearances in the face of the demands of novelty and ever-changing tastes. The personal dimension to relationships between clothes and their wearer are difficult to trace in available sources, yet some vivid accounts are available through saints' lives. Francis of Assisi famously gave back his rich robes to his father, while Angela of Foligno was one among a number of devout women said to have stripped off their extravagant garments in symbolic rejection of worldly chains.

While fashion is the book's thematic heart, half its substantive chapters are devoted to related aspects of luxury consumption and the fourteenth-century Italian economy. Chapter 5 is a study of the cost of luxuries and its implications for revising theories of a late fourteenth-century depression. Chapter 6 examines the retail and production aspects of luxury through discussion of shopping cultures and the activities of craftsmen, especially goldsmiths. Chapter 7 considers bankers and merchants as "marketmakers," fostering the trade in luxuries upon which their profits depended. The book demonstrates that there is nothing frothy about the history of fashion and luxury. It is a highly serious study, densely detailed and enormously learned. As befits its subject it provides a wealth of information on every page, drawing on expert knowledge of archival, literary, and visual sources. The prose is crisp and rigorously concise. Other historians might have made two books out of the same material. It repays close reading and will supply inspiration for many years to come.

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Elizabeth L'Estrange. *Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty, and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages.* (Manchester Medieval Studies.) Manchester University Press, 2008. Pp. xvii + 282; illus.

ELIZABETH L'ESTRANGE'S recent book, *Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty, and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, offers a study of maternal images (scenes of the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Birth of the Virgin, St. Anne,