

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Susan Groag Bell. *The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2004. Pp. xvii, 254. \$39.95

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2k57k8c9>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 21(0)

Author

Polanichka, Dana

Publication Date

2006

Copyright Information

Copyright 2006 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

subject scholar to enter into the “community of authorship.” Specifically, contemporary medievalists must avoid the prevalent specialization even within the field, so that they can learn to recognize the numerous references that saturate a medieval text. The modern reader must “do his best to seat himself as securely as he can within the community of authorship as he reads the medieval text.”

To those who are familiar with a medieval studies program in the United States, Evans points will seem to be a statement of the obvious, although her case glitters with interesting quotations and anecdotes. She closes her lecture with a condemnation of the hindrances to interdisciplinary studies in England and at Cambridge in particular. It is best if the American reader stops at this point. The quotations from various government and university councils, exercises, reports, and statutes are more obscure and abstruse than any medieval author previously cited. It may also shock one to hear, according to Evans, just how backward English higher education is in this regard. Evans condemns the focus on pragmatism, and appeals to academic freedom in defense of interdisciplinary studies. Those in the American system who feel that the traditional liberal arts and interdisciplinary studies continually get short shrift should take heart. Things could always be worse.

Evans' pamphlet may provide for some rumination in Oxford and Cambridge, where talk of change is wildly disproportionate to realized change. Otherwise, it is worth a look just for its array of anecdotes and quotations, which are almost all worth repeating. While the battle is not over, the case for interdisciplinary studies has long since been made and its necessity in medieval studies is obvious; we must just forge ahead and not give up the fight.

Ben Lee

University of California, Los Angeles

Susan Groag Bell. *The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. Pp. xvii, 254. \$39.95

Following the great microhistories to which she refers, and not unlike a gripping mystery novel, Susan Groag Bell initiates her recent study with a small clue: a ‘Citie of Ladies’ tapestry listed in Henry VIII’s inventory as belonging to Elizabeth I’s ‘guarderobe.’ Bell thus embarks upon what is equally

a research project and an adventure, as she searches for this and eventually other tapestries depicting Christine de Pizan's most famous writing.

In her initial chapter, "The First Clue," Bell recounts the early days of her journey, the questions driving her work, and her methodological approach. The story begins with lost tapestries from the sixteenth century—ones which have yet to be found—but soon expands to include an interest in the patrons of those tapestries and their relationship to Christine de Pizan, upon whose writing the works were based. After all, Bell first came upon these tapestries when studying Christine de Pizan's relation to the humanist tradition, and the existence of these tapestries suggests to her that "Christine de Pizan's ideas remained current more than a hundred years after her death, enmeshed in a complex cultural and political world" (3).

Understanding why Elizabeth I and other patrons would have wanted to possess these tapestries, one must understand the subject of them. This, in chapter two, Bell turns to Christine de Pizan's and her *Book of the City of Ladies*. She presents a clear biographical account of de Pizan as well an overview of her writings and a beginning look at the dissemination of the manuscript of *The Book of the City of Ladies*. With the next chapter, Bell examines the larger context of this tapestry—that is, the life of Elizabeth I and the collection of tapestries owned by her. In doing so, Bell discovers that Elizabeth's brother, Edward, also had a set of tapestries depicting the *City of Ladies*. When attempting to determine where Henry VIII would have acquired the tapestries, Bell discovers a third set: Margaret of Austria received a gift of similar tapestries during Henry's triumphal entry into Tournai. This clue leads Bell to a chapter focused on "Tapestry Production in the Early Renaissance" (history, method, subject matter, design, measurements, cartoon ownership, women's participation, etc.), followed by a biographical portrait of Margaret of Austria, who, we soon discover, owned two manuscripts of de Pizan's famous work.

For Bell, each clue leads to another, and her examination of Margaret of Austria sparks an inquiry into Anne of Brittany—who turns out to also own a *City of Ladies* tapestry set many years earlier! In chapter six, "Anne of Brittany's 'Cité des Dames,'" presents a biographical portrait of this royal woman, to better comprehend the context and uncover information about this work of art. Along the way, an eight-panel set of tapestries of the same subject matter emerges in Bell's sources. Perhaps the most enigmatic set yet, this eight-panel group is not firmly attached to a particular owner. Bell, without any evidence, can only venture a guess that Louise of Savoy, who shared some of Christine's convictions, originally owned them. Yet, more problematic than ownership is the number of panels within this set, since the two extra ones complicate Bell's original hypothesis regarding the manuscript

illuminations that served as models for the cartoons. Nevertheless, the author can remain assured of the well-established nature of Christine de Pizan's writing as tapestry subject.

Having moved from her original focus on England to concentration on France and Belgium, Bell, in chapter eight, now leaves continental Europe to examine a 'Citie of Dammys' tapestry in Scotland, which appeared in a 1539 inventory of James V of Scotland. Again, the line of ownership eludes Bell, as she sketches portraits of James, Mary of Guise, and Mary Queen of Scots, in an effort to pin down details that are more substantial. Chapter nine returns to England to test out further theories about the history of the *Citie of Ladies* tapestry that began Bell's book.

It is in the tenth and final chapter that Susan Groag Bell reaches the crux of her argument, considering "Christine de Pizan's Legacy to the Renaissance." Continually fascinated "with Christine de Pizan's life and creative career," the author attempts to bring the contemporary audience to life, to understand the context and function of the tapestries (149). While a full understanding of the early modern audience is, Bell concedes, impossible to achieve, one can clearly assume that the early modern European world continued to be interested in the allegorical city that Christine de Pizan had created. In addition, she even proclaims, these tapestries provide "insight into how it felt to rule, as women, in such an excessively male world" (163); and in the concluding pages, Bell considers whether these works of art were assertions of female strength, in an inconclusive but decidedly feminist tone.

Susan Groag Bell clearly has studied the popular methodology of microhistory, whose designation derives not from the dimensions of the object of study, but from the scale of the analysis. That is, Bell narrows the focus of her study to a single tapestry subject in order to understand the broader context; it is a directed focus on these particular works of literature and art in an attempt to extrapolate a larger picture of the intellectual and cultural life of royal women in early modern Europe.

Furthermore, Bell follows the approach of the much-referenced microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg in her manner of writing. Her book demonstrates the narrative quality of *microstoria*, and as she narrates, Bell is conscious to allow the lacunae in the sources and in her findings to become part of that account. Thus the first-person voice quite often creeps into her study, as she describes the very steps she took, the obstacles she encountered, the questions that pushed her, the disappointments and victories that she found along the way. Yet sometimes Bell's voice overwhelms the subject to a negative extent, distracting the reader and leaving one more aware of the scholar's journey than the actual fruits of her labor.

In addition, this latest piece of microhistorical research no doubt opens

itself to the criticisms attached to many of its predecessors: it demands too much speculation, too much uncertainty remains, and too many leaps of faith. For example, the questions Bell asks at the commencement of her work (i.e., “Why might Elizabeth have wanted to possess these particular tapestries?” p. 8) verge on the extremely speculative. As the work goes on, she magnifies many small clues and makes assumptions without evidence. Fortunately, Bell is ever careful to delineate which facts and interpretations rest on shaky ground. By detailing her thought processes, her assumptions, and her findings, Bell ensures that the reader emerges from the work aware of the difficulties in undertaking such a study. Yet, the book deals with even further difficulties due to subject matter, since it requires a vast comparative study of royal families in France, England, Scotland, and Belgium. Nevertheless, here also Bell deftly handles these problems by finding other ways of narrowing down the focus of her study, finding commonalities and relationships without ever glossing over important contextual differences.

Finally, as Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms* and Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* have demonstrated, microhistory can reach a wider audience than many other methodological approaches to the past, and Bell’s recent work proves that quite brilliantly. The juxtaposition of serious manuscript research with first-person accounts of that work, the mix of important intellectual queries with clear biographical accounts of all involved, the straightforward narrative account in lucid prose—all this makes for a book accessible to all who may come upon it. The layout itself is inviting, from its beautiful dustcover illustrations, to an elegant type font, and well-chosen plates illustrating artwork as well as historical actors. Bell’s work combines the light genre of fictional mysteries with strong scholarship. Although the style offers much to commend, one wishes for a more scholarly tone, a more densely woven piece of scholarship, a work more clearly directed to the scholarly field and less to the general public. The insights hidden throughout, the overflowing bibliography, as well as Bell’s obvious command of numerous languages suggests a potential not fully reached within the pages of this thin monograph. However, focusing on the book’s shortcomings ignores the larger picture: Bell has achieved what all too many cannot—a captivating read full of information and insight.

Dana Polanichka
University of California, Los Angeles
