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E. Jane Burns, *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. viii + 256 pp. 25 illustrations, map, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8122-4154-9.

Review by Sarah-Grace Heller, Ohio State University.

E. Jane Burns' writing in *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature* is quite like the silk she seeks to describe: elegant, fluid, draping, spectacular at times; highly aware of the erotic, and also allowing what the language of medieval textiles drapes and conceals to remain concealed when such is its function.

As the title aptly indicates, Burns aims to reread a selection of Old French literary sources, reading past the broader plots and chivalric themes to locate what she terms "important narrative keyholes" through which to catch glimpses of international women's lives, particularly their associations with the fabrication, purchase, and wearing of cloth. This is the sense of the title's *Textile Geography*: luxury fabrics connected the cities of Northern Europe to the wider Mediterranean world and even lands further east. This textile geography stands in contrast to topographical, political, religious, or linguistic geographies of the medieval period, marked far less by power struggles, wars, or intolerance than by the desire for commerce and rich adornment.

For readers familiar with the lively discussions currently addressing medieval material culture such as those in the journal *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* edited by Gale Owen-Crocker and Robin Netherton, and those in particular familiar with the Old French textile passages found abundantly in works attributed to such authors as Chrétien de Troyes and Jean Renart (as readers of Burns' *Courtly Love Undressed* [1] will be), the delights of this study will probably lie in the book's comparative work. In this volume she reads the European narratives by going beyond them, tying them to legends from China, Marco Polo's records of his travels, and to the history of international cloth production and trade in places such as Sicily, Thebes, Byzantium, the Levant, and Spain. These comparisons are impressionistic, drawing parallels and observing resonances rather than forcing links that could inevitably be dismissed a conjecture. For example, although her interest is obviously in women, she allows that frequently the gender of silk workers is obscured, and we cannot be sure of it; likewise, the vocabulary of silk is often not as straightforward to define as might be hoped, and terms must be allowed to remain ambiguous or polysemous at times.

The twelfth century has been called the great silk era in medieval culture; in the thirteenth century, northern European woolens gained in prominence, both in the marketplace and in texts and other representations. Accordingly, the bulk of the texts Burns examines date to the twelfth century. However, she does not emphasize this chronology, focusing instead on her notion of geography. The book's point of departure and the feature of the first two chapters is the famously problematic episode of the Château de Pesme Aventure in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, in which the eponymous questing hero comes upon a castle containing three hundred poorly dressed women held prisoner by two demons and forced to "work" (Old French *ouvrer*, an ambiguous term which can refer to both weaving and embroidery) silk for low wages. The scene's striking similarities to the modern

sweatshops of garment districts around the world belie the episode's utter uniqueness in Old French literature, as well as the general tendency towards the marvelous in Chrétien's work.^[2] *Yvain* is one of the most frequently read medieval French works; readers often wonder what level of realism to attribute to this passage. Scholars have debated the validity of linking these miserable women to the gynecaea (women's cloth-working workshops) of the Carolingian period, of Byzantium, or even of twelfth-century France.^[3]

Burns boldly takes on this fraught problem, emphasizing the question posed by *Yvain* himself: where did these women come from? Indeed, they seem transported into the Arthurian realm from some other world. The text says they come from a vaguely mythical "Isle of Maidens"; but what does this signify? In chapter one, Burns compares the episode to a Chinese tale in which the fifth-century King of Khotan breaks the Chinese monopoly on silk by requesting a Chinese princess in marriage, and telling her that no silk is made in his lands and if she wants it she must smuggle out mulberry tree seeds and silkworm eggs; to stories of monks smuggling silkworm eggs at the behest of the emperor Justinian. The scene is then further tied to Blanchefleur's sale into slavery and later disguise as a silk merchant in *Floire et Blanchefleur*, with observations on the slave trade's links to the luxury cloth trade throughout the medieval Mediterranean, and then to the lexicon of fabrics. It is noted that textiles once associated with Baghdad, for example, could be manufactured in Damascus, Tyre, Antioch, or Almeria, defying their geographically linked names, and suggesting a movement of both merchants and workers.

Chapter two focuses on how the *Yvain* episode presents a "narrative keyhole" on to the cultural geography of mid-twelfth-century Palermo, where silk workers taken in raids on Thebes and Corinth were relocated by Norman King Roger II, and where Muslim and Christian languages, cultures, and textile techniques coexisted and were shared. Burns reads the maiden's professed fear of sleep because of the demons' threats "to their members" as a veiled reference to sexual abuse and rape (a reading that will not surprise readers familiar with her earlier volume, *Bodytalk*).^[4] She manages to tie all these geographically disparate stories and references together to read the Château de Pesme Aventure as a story that must be understood for its resonances of a complex transnational medieval culture of displacement through the slave trade and the cloth trade.

The prized decorative silk purses known as *aumosnières* are the feature of chapter three, which argues that these purses harmoniously held seemingly contradictory functions both luxurious, as love gifts and fashionable accessories, and religious, as reliquaries and alms purses. There is a lovely illustration from a thirteenth-century Apocalypse manuscript showing household goods in decreasing order of value, with three *aumosnières* of different shapes placed at the forefront, before precious cloth, furs, jewels, and tableware.^[5] Whereas moralists regularly denounced finery in the name of Christian humility and piety, Burns shows that in a "reading through textiles," particularly one focused on the concerns of the women so often at the margins of texts, it is clear that on another level of cultural existence piety and commerce could coexist harmoniously. Chapter three examines the clever use of *aumosnières* by beleaguered heroines in the *Roman de la Rose ou Guillaume de Dole* and the *Dit de L'Empereur Constant* to turn the tables on the men who attempt to impose their wills on them.

In chapter four, Burns juxtaposes readings of two ladies of different "Carthages": Dido of the *Roman d'Enéas* who rules the Tunisian city known as Carthage, and Nicolette of *Aucassin et Nicolette*, abducted from the Iberian Muslim city of Cartegena ("Cartage" in Old French). Burns emphasizes that the Dido of antiquity is transformed in her twelfth-century incarnation into a woman seduced by Aeneas' gift of fine cloth (substituted for the scepter of Virgil's version) who commits suicide with her face buried in the fine bedding she had shared with him, smothering herself by kissing his "garnemenz" and "dras" (clothes/ bedclothes). She also draws attention to another little-noted earlier passage in which Dido, a refugee from Tyre, grabs enough land to build a great city from the local ruler by arranging to buy as much land as could be covered by an oxhide, and then proceeding to cut the hide into narrow strips, which bound together enclosed a suitable periphery.

The chapter's attention then shifts to another displaced heroine, this one comic rather than tragic: Nicolette, a blond, blue-eyed white Saracen sold as a slave to Europeans, who escapes, dyes her skin dark at one point to assimilate back into French culture, and is eventually recognized by her adoptive French mother and legitimized for marriage with her French beloved, Aucassin, by being wrapped in fine silks. Although the narrative demonizes Moors, as so often in Old French literature, the French Viscount of Biaucaire is characterized, Burns points out, as a count who traffics in women. Whereas the Dido narrative points didactically to the threatening foreignness of ancient (and contemporary?) Mediterranean civilizations, like many texts signaling the "seductive dangers of Frankish crusading colonies in the Levant (p. 119)," silk in Nicolette's story connotes a hybrid existence: it can transform a Saracen slave into a marriageable courtly lady. The book's argument is that silk may threaten and seduce, but above all it bridges the cultural divides imposed by other ideologies.

The final two chapters concentrate on the link between precious silks and the culture of pilgrimage and relics, and the parallel routes and geographies traced by them. Chapter five studies *Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, a twelfth-century comic epic in which Charlemagne's wife says that king Hugo of Constantinople wears his crown more elegantly than her husband, prompting the emperor to travel to the wealthy city with his twelve peers in challenge. Burns emphasizes that it is only the queen at Charlemagne's court who has the broader vision to look beyond the court's perimeter, thanks precisely to her "foolish and silly" love of finery of eastern lands. For all that the queen is shamed for her remarks, Burns notes that she forces the king to take a broader view of medieval kingship and other cultural formations: the "textile geography," in contrast with that of Charlemagne, refuses isolationism, favoring wide horizons. Burns sets this narrative in contrast with a number of other ideological works featuring encounters with the East, including Joinville's account of the seventh crusade, the Pseudo-Turpin chronicle, the *Prise d'Orange* from the Guillaume d'Orange cycle, and Notker's highly legendary biography of Charlemagne. She argues, as for other texts in *Courtly Love Undressed*, that this is an example of how the silk-clad courtly lady systematically undermines the Christian-Saracen ideological divide.

The final chapter turns to different types of artifacts and texts: the Virgin's chemise, the celebrated relic of Chartres; lead pilgrims' badges representing the relic and different forms of international medieval cloth and clothing; and the Miracles of the Virgin texts which narrate the power of the Chartrain relics, linking them regularly to good commercial conduct as well as church fundraising. The tradition, as seen in the badges and stories, features a simple linen undergarment, worn by the Virgin during the conception and birth of Christ. Replicas of the chemise, made from the linen of Chartrain manufacture that became a prominent part of the city's economy in the mid-twelfth century, were valued by women in childbirth and knights in combat. The chemise was never actually seen, having been encased in a reliquary in the ninth century; when the reliquary was finally opened in the eighteenth century, no chemise was found, only two lengths of luxury cloth, thought to be of Syrian, Byzantine, or Egyptian manufacture, dating to the eighth to the eleventh centuries. After compellingly tracing this surprising story of mistaken relic identity, Burns proposes again a reading of how cloth and clothing can speak to the movement between culturally specific sites and generation of cross-cultural identities, a welcome contrast to the prevailing characterization of medieval clothing in terms of status. Here is another example of how cloth of probable Eastern origin, potentially Saracen, effectively wrought miracles in a Christian context, and successfully fostered a cloth industry that made a city prosperous.

The volume is carefully researched. While the book's aim is not an exhaustive history of silk but rather provocatively comparative re-readings, the bibliography does offer a wealth of helpful references for those interested in the international silk trade. Similarly, the glossary is not exhaustive, but should prove a useful reference to those navigating the complex and often ambiguous lexicon of medieval silk, dyes, and linens. The book's twenty-five illustrations are helpful and closely linked to the text, and

should please those who may have been frustrated with such textually-focused works' tendency to abjure images.

NOTES

[1] E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

[2] Anthime Fourrier, *Le courant réaliste dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen-Age* (Paris: Nizet, 1960), pp. 113-14.

[3] Relating the scene to gynecaea, Pierre Jonin, "Aspects de la vie sociale au XIIe siècle dans *Yvain*," *L'Information littéraire* 16.2 (1964), p. 52; Jean Frappier, *Étude sur Yvain ou le Chevalier au lion de Chrétien de Troyes* (Paris: Société d'édition d'enseignement supérieur, 1969), pp. 50-63; Francisque Michel, *Recherches sur le commerce la fabrication, et l'usage des étoffes de soie, d'or, et d'argent, et autres tissus précieux en Occident*, 2 vols. (Paris: Crapelet, 1852-54), vol. 1, p. 91. Krijnie Cigaar, "Chrétien de Troyes et la "matière byzantine": les damoiselles du Château de Pesme Aventure," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 32. 4 [1989]: 325-31. Others have argued that Chrétien's description is not an accurate portrait of urban workers in high medieval France: Robert A. Hall, "The Silk Factory in Chrestien de Troyes' *Yvain*," in *Modern Language Notes* 56 (1941): pp. 418-22; Sarah-Grace Heller, "Obscure Lands and Obscured Hands: Fairy Embroidery and the Ambiguous Vocabulary of Medieval Textile Decoration," in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 5 (2009), p. 20.

[4] E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

[5] Figure 7, p. 71. Paris BnF ms. fr. 13096, fol. 62.

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