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Laura Weigert, *Weaving Sacred Stories: French Choir Tapestries and the Performance of Clerical Identity*. Conjunctions of Religion and Power in the Medieval Past series. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. xvi + 246 pp. Illustrations, plates, notes, bibliography, appendices, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4008-4.

Review by Kathryn A. Edwards, University of South Carolina.

Dr. Weigert's book analyzes the setting and socio-cultural significance of three fifteenth- and sixteenth-century choir tapestries. Stated so simply, the book might seem to be of limited interest. Moreover, her statements about the importance of "reading" tapestries within their choir setting and the valuable insights their construction, use and contents provide about the clergy can seem commonplaces to scholars interested in cultural studies who are versed in more theoretical literature about the arts. Yet what makes Weigert's book so striking and valuable is that this work has not been done for medieval clerical tapestries, as opposed to lay tapestries which dominate scholarly analysis. To provide thorough and explicit descriptions of each tapestry's original setting, Weigert relies on an impressive mix of archival, printed, and architectural sources and produces a truly interdisciplinary study of medieval art and society.

The bulk of Weigert's book focuses on three tapestry cycles: *the Lives of Piat and Eleutherius*, *Life of Gervasius and Protasius*, and *Life of Stephen*. Each was designed to be hung behind the choir stalls during important celebrations. Initially separate from the laity, they were not the "books for the illiterate" that have become a commonplace in medieval scholarship about art. Each illustrated the life of a saint who was significant to that particular religious community. Each was donated to the church for this purpose by an individual who was a leading member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Despite these similarities, Weigert argues that each tapestry cycle was unique because of the variations in the setting in which it was hung and appreciated. As such, Weigert analyzes each cycle as a case study with three primary questions in mind: "Why were these stories chosen and displayed on particular feast days? What impact did the architectural and ceremonial setting in which they were displayed have on how they were read? What function did they serve for their donors and audience" (p. 11)?

Weigert's first case study is in chapter two where she examines the *Lives of Piat and Eleutherius*, the earliest extant choir tapestry cycle. Weigert begins with this work not only because it is the oldest, but because it was designed to reinforce the claims of the canons of Notre-Dame de Tournai to playing a central role in that city's history. Relying on extant parts of the tapestry cycle and an eighteenth-century transcription of the text woven into the top of the tapestries, Weigert describes how the tapestries' contents, design, and placement interacted to place the church at the center of Tournai's development. Particularly striking is the precision with which Weigert can place the images historically; for example, "[i]mages of historic ceremonies along the tapestry conform to the directives for high feast days in the cathedral's fifteenth-century Ordinal" (p. 39). By combining apocryphal events from the city's history with legends about Tournai's leading saints (and stressing the close relationships between those saints and Tournai's lay community), the tapestries aid the canons' integration into the life of late-medieval and early-modern Tournai. While the tapestry cycle was not displayed everyday, Weigert convincingly argues that its use on high feast days confirmed the contemporary clergy's innate tie to the Tournai's spiritual past.

Chapter three analyzes the *Life of Gervasius and Protasius* which was displayed in Le Mans's cathedral. Donated to the cathedral by canon Martin Guerande in 1509, it was placed in the choir during high feast days until the eighteenth century. Gervasius and Protasius were Le Mans's patrons, and their relics were in the choir. For this reason, it seems almost commonsensical that they would be the subject of any tapestries displayed there, but Weigert stresses that to thus disregard their context and effect would be to neglect the powerful role such tapestries could play. In order to analyze these roles, Weigert provides a detailed analysis of the sources for the saints' lives, their placement in the cathedral, their treatment over the course of centuries, and their role as gifts. Many of her methods and conclusions echo those of the preceding chapter and are equally plausible. Just as solid but not particularly inspiring is her detailed discussion of the inclusion of canon Guerande and his bishop, Philip of Luxembourg, in the tapestry cycle itself. Her analyses of their significance are original, but the methods she uses are quite traditional. Moreover, in an analysis which stresses the importance of the actual figures of the donor and the bishop it would be useful to have more specific information about these figures, even if that information was relegated to the footnotes.

The last of Weigert's case studies, the *Life of Stephen*, was designed for Auxerre cathedral and is the subject of chapter four. Given that the coat of arms of its donor, Bishop Jean Baillet (1478-1513) of Auxerre, is woven into the tapestry nine times, this tapestry cycle would seem ripe for the type of analysis Weigert undertakes in the previous chapter. Because there is very little information about his episcopate, however, Weigert approaches this cycle from a different and more successful angle, asking: "[h]ow did the performance of the liturgy in the cathedral of Auxerre inform and transform the woven text, and what was the story of Stephen that this ensemble produced?" (82) The stories of Stephen's life depicted in the tapestry cycle appear to come from two sources: the *Golden Legend* and early fifth-century letters. The tapestries' placement in the choir, however, determined the ways in which these stories were used and the tapestries were designed. In the process, "[t]he saint's life becomes...a demonstration of the sacrifice performed at each mass. The enactment of Stephen's martyrdom in the woven and spoken versions of his *vita* represented in the choir provided a historical parallel for the Eucharistic celebration at the high altar" (p. 101).

Chapter five, "Woven *Vitae* of the Saints and Clerical Identity," summarizes her findings and repeats her primary analytical assumption: "[t]he narrative theory that guided the making of the woven *vitae* can be deduced through a study of the choir tapestries themselves" (p. 110). The tapestry cycles stress the privileged relationship of a certain clerical community with a saint and sometimes with the wider community. Devices found throughout the tapestries relate the saint to both the city and the religious community, helping to integrate two sometimes contentious communities. The ceremonial representations are those of the community in which the tapestries were hung, as are the liturgical vestments that the individuals in the tapestries are wearing. As such, the tapestry cycles also helped to achieve a clerical transcendence, linking the existing clerical community with its more illustrious antecedents during each high feast day.

Despite the book's many strengths, there are aspects that need developing. In particular, Weigert needs to discuss the actual process by which tapestry cycles were fabricated in more detail than she does; the process and time of construction are fundamental in a book that repeatedly stresses the need to contextualize these tapestries. Language also matters in this respect. In her brief discussion of the history of tapestries, she describes sixth-century "tapestries" in such a way that a less informed reader might assume that they were the same type of textile as the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century products she analyzes. Weigert is at her best with art historical material, the *vitae* for the various saints, and the documents that provide the setting for her tapestries, but there's nothing particularly new or innovative in her insistence on contextualization. In fact, I would have liked to see more done with the urban context for these tapestries, provincial political and ecclesiastical distinctions, and the social and economic relationships between the canons and the community.

In fact, while Weigert's descriptions are precise and her stress on contextualization convincing, many of the most impressive aspects of this book are not tied to its interpretation. The book is beautifully produced on thick paper with sixteen color plates and with over sixty photographs inserted throughout the work. Only in Chapter 4 do the images get significantly out of sync with the text. In addition, Weigert supports her analysis of place by providing detailed diagrams of where each panel in the tapestry series was hung which helps visualization enormously. Weigert's book also fills a significant gap in cataloging. There is a detailed appendix of extant and documented choir tapestries from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, providing, where available, a description of each section of a tapestry series, its subject, its commissioner, its setting, its dates of production, its current location, its *tituli*, and specialized secondary literature on it. In both its presentation and its contents, Weigert's book makes a valuable contribution to studies of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France and Flanders and suggests directions for future research.

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