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REVIEWS

Cristelle L. Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism and Gender in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998) 264 pp., illustrations.

Carried in the wedding procession from the bride's home to that of her new husband, *cassoni* or chests (known in the Renaissance as *forzieri*) conveyed the bride's trousseau. The panel paintings which decorate the front and sides of these chests have been thought to contain clues about Renaissance culture. Previously, scholars examined the scenes for evidence of humanist learning or signs of everyday life within the scenes. Cristelle L. Baskins scrutinizes these panels for symptoms of gender relations in fifteenth-century Florence. She limits her study to panels depicting classical stories about women, and the underlying issue of her book is the various meanings these *donne illustri* may have had for different Renaissance audiences. As these chests were intended for the use of women, it would at first seem appropriate that *cassoni* would be decorated with stories that might appeal to them. The chests, however, were purchased by the bride's father or future father-in-law, which explains scholars' common interpretation of these stories as "moralizing."

In each chapter, Baskins focuses on different heroines, attempting to say too much about each one. My summary focuses on the most interesting aspects of her discussions. Beginning with the Amazons, she attempts to unravel the mystery of how women who killed their own husbands and sons were considered fit wives for Greek men and, by extension, suitable subjects for wedding furniture. She then considers Dido and the various Aeneid stories. Here the discussion concentrates on the omission of Dido's suicide from Aeneid *cassoni*. Instead, the panels show her meeting with Aeneas, the banquet during which she falls in love, and, occasionally, their ride into the cave where they consummate their love. The Aeneas story continues into the next chapter with Camilla, who fought to prevent Aeneas from conquering Latium. Here the author contrasts Camilla's failure to marry with Lavinia's success in this regard, placing the blame squarely on Camilla's father's shoulders. Baskins next turns to the Sabines, whom she considers more as peacemakers rather than rape victims. She contrasts the role of Hersilia, the "spokeswoman" for the Sabines, with the distrust of female speech in fifteenth-century Florence. Baskins then turns her attention to Lucretia's rape and suicide. She questions the admirable chastity which led to Lucretia's violation, as well as the impropriety of her suicide. A father's murder of his own daughter to protect her virginity concludes the book. By examining Virginia's death by her father's hand, Baskins examines male identification with martyred women.

Baskins considers the classical source of each story and then investigates the tale's transformation in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. When they are available, she includes contemporary interpretations of or reactions to the narrative. Once grounded in the literary sources of the images, she interprets the panels. Baskins's reliance on different critical theories, such as gender studies, postmodernism, and feminism, distracts her from closely questioning the selected *cassoni*. While she claims to seek to join historical context with

critical theory, the evidence of her book shows an overwhelming dependence on theory at the expense of contextualizing the furniture panels themselves.

Her grounding in literary studies is both a source of strength and weakness for her book. While she provides a wealth of thoroughly researched information regarding the heroines' stories, she becomes bogged down in the literary, and in literary theory, forgetting to look closely at the objects themselves. For instance, in her examination of Botticelli's *spalliera* panels—that is, panels hung above the wainscoting—depicting the Lucretia story, she sees the captives in the attic of the triumphal arch as “reassert(ing) power asymmetries and domination” (142). Yet a closer examination reveals that these prisoners resemble the captive Dacians from Trajan's Forum, which were reused in the attic of the Arch of Constantine. Thus, rather than including images of captives in a liberation scene as a “metacommentary,” Botticelli might instead have been trying to locate the scene for the viewer within Rome.

Baskin also neglects the furniture panels' original function as wedding gifts and objects carried in wedding processions. For instance, the exclusion of Dido's suicide from the narrative becomes less surprising when one remembers that the images were intended for a marriage or wedding audience. The concentration on Dido's love for Aeneas was appropriate for decorating a wedding chest, whereas depictions of her suicide would inappropriately focus attention on her later role as a scorned woman. Perhaps Baskin's rejection of Gombrich's approach to the study of *cassoni* as a combination of humanist stories and “subject matter appropriate to the auspicious occasion” is responsible for her inability to see this explanation for the omission of Dido's suicide on *cassoni* (17). She claims that, “Gombrich downplays the inauspicious and disruptive circumstances of the coupling of Paris and Helen, rape and adultery, in order to concentrate on the idealized themes of exemplary beauty and fair offspring” (17). A close examination of the objects themselves, however, reveals that the artists themselves often downplayed the disruptive aspects of the narratives on the panels.

The central issue of Baskin's book is never articulated and hence never resolved: why would men purchase furniture decorated with images of strong, active women in a culture which sharply restricted a woman's ability to act or speak? Nonetheless, Baskin's study is a valuable compilation of literary sources pertaining to certain classical heroines.

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