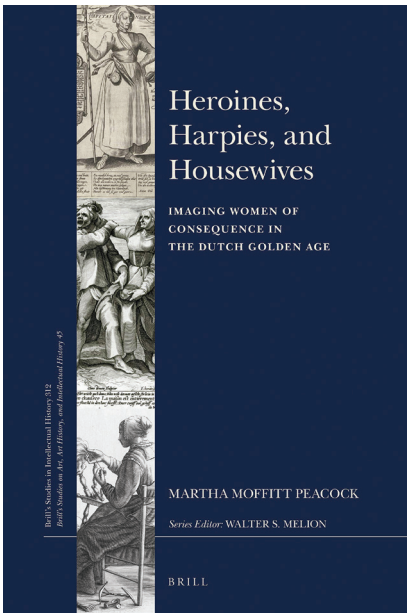
Review

Martha Moffitt Peacock, *Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives. Imaging Women of Consequence in the Dutch Golden Age*, Leiden, Brill, 2020, 506 pp. ISBN 9789004399037



When painting a picture of the prominence of women in the early modern Dutch Republic, for centuries historians have eagerly quoted from the many eyewitness reports of contemporary foreign travellers and observers. The Florentine merchant Lodovico Guicciardini, for example, in his overview of the Low Countries (1567), wrote about a society in which women held sway: 'The Women governe all, both within the doors and without, and make all bargaines, which joined with the naturalle desire that Women have to beare rule, maketh them too imperious and troublesome' (1).

In recent years, a myriad of systematic studies supports these seemingly anecdotal observations. Scholars such as Danielle van de Heuvel, Manon van der Heijden, and Martine van Elk have highlighted the noteworthy economic, social, and literary agency of early modern Dutch women, and art historians like Elizabeth Honig, Mariët Westermann, and Heidi de Mare have redefined women's role in the art market. By reassessing the constraining dichotomies between the public and private, dilettantism and professionalism, as well as the general structure of the cultural field, it has become clear that women were, indeed, undeniable forces during the heydays of Dutch culture. Martha Moffitt Peacock states that notwithstanding women's proven prominence, interpretations of early modern Netherlandish art are, however, still dominated by a patriarchal discourse viewing depicted women primarily as submissive subjects. Her thought-provoking new monograph, *Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives*, addresses this lacuna. She argues it is time to reassess sixteenth- and seventeenth-century visual culture from an emancipatory perspective, with a 'female gaze'.

In a densely-informed introduction, Peacock lays the theoretical, contextual, and historiographical foundations of her argument that women's growing significance and

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influence must have been reflected in the period's explosive production of female imagery. She then zooms in on the images of Dutch women in three lengthy and richly-illustrated chapters structured around the three 'archetypes' of her book title: the heroine, the harpy, and the housewife. This exploration of the visual manifestations of Dutch women of significance starts with a discussion of the origins and uses of the typology of the female heroine. The war against the Spanish monarchy, which Peacock outlines in chapter two, presented early modern Dutch women with the unique opportunity to claim a prominent and public position in society. This was reflected in an extensive production of imagery of 'strong women', consisting of both the female warriors of the Dutch Revolt, including iconic figures such as Kenau Simonsdr. Hasselaer and Magdalena Moons, as well as women, like Anna Maria van Schurman, who excelled in the arts and sciences. Despite prevailing social determinants, including visual tradition, cultural biases, and institutions of male power, these women proved to have 'the capacity to visually imagine new roles for themselves as skilled and prominent' (188). They turned out not to be the exception to the rule, but together they formed 'a typological turning point' (87). They 'contributed to a traditional yet unique Dutch schema – the powerful heroine – that continually enhanced women's position in the public sphere' (188) more generally, which proved a strong inspiration for generations to follow.

But not only heroines could embody female agency. Even the at first sight critical and comical imagery of harpies (explored in chapter three) could be viewed as a reflection of Dutch women's growing autonomy. Developing antithetically to the heroine images, the chastisement of tyrannical and overbearing women who took over male roles and caused great uneasiness became extremely popular by the first half of the seventeenth century, covering a wide range of media including art, drama, and various types of texts such as farces. By reading these images beyond the dominant patriarchal discourse, Peacock argues, one can scrutinize their hidden transcripts that reveal both a fear of actual female power and the opportunities for subversion of hegemonic authority. Viewed through Peacock's 'female gaze' these seemingly undisputed, negative portrayals of shrewish wives could provide female viewers with the opportunity to take delight in their depicted triumph over men and in their aspiration to 'even the score'.

Following a more or less chronological development, the emancipating image of Dutch women culminates in the final chapter. Around the 1650s, the increased acceptance, and even admiration of strong women resulted in the gradual demise of the harpy topos in favour of respectful and reversing views of the Dutch housewife, Peacock argues. In her particularly compelling reevaluation of the roles of housewives depicted in (oftentimes well-known) genre paintings and prints, she moves away from the traditional moralist interpretation and highlights how these images reflect women's skillfulness and autonomy.

Although Peacock's proposed 'female gaze' invites an impressive reinterpretation of Dutch art, her analysis of the connections among images of Dutch women comes with its own inevitable blind spots. Occasionally, the diachronic perspective on the developments of the imagery of female power – presenting a strong lineage from the heroines of the Revolt, via the shrewish harpies, to the noble Netherlandish housewives at the end of the seventeenth century – leaves perhaps too little room to consider the effect of synchronic developments that occurred in other countries and/or disciplines. The self-imagery of

Dutch learned women, for example, was possibly less influenced by the 'national' heroines of the Revolt but rather modelled after renowned *exempla* from the international learned community. And the decline of the imagery of the harpy – which Peacock sees as proof of women's growing agency – can also be explained by a drastic shift in the literary field. Due to the fast-growing influence of French theatre poetics in the Low Countries, the once popular peasant ('boertige') characters in Dutch farces and comic plays were replaced by everyday people from bourgeois life, consequently also turning the shrewish harpy into a backdrop. This would provide an explanation that has little to do with the emancipatory progress that Peackock suggests this development represents. Sometimes, Peacock's generally compelling analysis of the progressive image of female agency in the Republic has the risk of sketching a too optimistic image, presenting the Republic as a unique emancipatory paradise.

But perhaps this is exactly what is needed to counter the dominant discourse viewing women as submissive subjects. Overall, *Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives* presents a refreshing new perspective on the much-discussed visual culture of the flourishing Dutch Republic. It should be read as a warm invitation – or perhaps an imperative recommendation – to include the 'female gaze' in the art historian's toolkit.

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