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Book Review: Tomislav Vignjević, Depictions of the Three Orders and Estates around the Year 1500, *Triplex Status Mundi*

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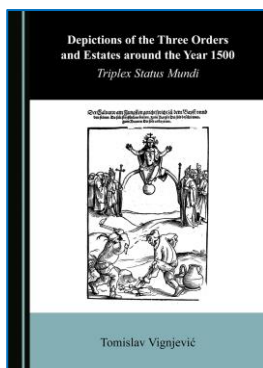
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PEREGRINATIONS

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Review Tomislav Vignjević. *Depictions of the Three Orders and Estates around the Year 1500. Triplex Status mundi* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020), 162 pp., £58.99, (hardback); ISBN 978-1-5275-3323-3

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Tomislav Vignjević's *Depictions of the Three Orders and Estates around the Year 1500.*

Triplex Status Mundi examines the trifunctional division into orders of late medieval and early modern society. While the author acknowledges in the introduction that this topic has received consistent scholarly attention, it has never been explored in dialogue with art history (p. 2). To that end, Vignjević undertakes an investigation of 15th-and-16th-century prints, illuminations, drawings, and paintings depicting the three orders—or estates—of society. Through the lenses of iconography and iconology, Vignjević studies this visual material as a site of intersection among political ideology, eschatological theology, and socio-historical reality. Arranged into nine unnumbered chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion, the first three are concerned with the definition of the three-order scheme, its thorough description in textual sources, and its adaptability to representations of society during the period. The following six chapters narrow the focus, analyzing a plethora of art works displaying the three orders, illustrated by 43 black-and-white images, included in the middle of the volume.

In the first chapter, “The Definitions of the Estates in Society,” Vignjević argues that medieval society was a static, stratified, and hierarchic system made up of estates—social categories to which individuals belonged through birth or privilege: *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores* (pp. 5-6). Unfortunately, translations and definitions of these terms are not provided here; rather, Vignjević postpones this until the beginning of the next chapter (p. 15). As a result, readers who are not familiar with Latin are left with the task of determining by themselves that the author is specifically referring to clergy (“those who pray”), nobility or warriors (“those who fight”), and commoners or peasants (“those who work”). Vignjević’s definition of medieval society as an “organic whole” (p. 7) made of different parts, which cooperated in “harmony within inequality” (p. 9) is more clearly addressed. This point is efficiently unpacked as the author grounds it in textual sources, including by Humbert of Silva Candida (d. 1061). According to Humbert, the trifunctional division of society could be equated to a human body made of different parts which collaborate, guaranteeing the function of the entire organism. The clerics were compared to the eyes, which occupied the upper part of the body, to emphasize their privileged closeness to the divine and their role as God’s intermediaries. The secular authority corresponded to the chest and arms because they used their power to defend the Church, and, finally, the lower limbs represented the farmers and artisans, indispensable for the functioning of the whole society, but inevitably subordinated to the upper religious and secular authorities (p. 8).

The in-depth examination of primary sources surrounding the three orders is the strongest point of the second chapter, offering an accurate reconstruction of the origins

and historical development of the trifunctional partition of medieval society. The author rightly observes that 9th-century commentaries on patristic literature reiterated the belief that the hierarchy of social orders stemmed from God's will (pp. 18-19). This structure of society was thus incontestable and became even more consolidated under feudalism. This socio-political phenomenon caused a sturdy separation between knights and peasants into two different estates with distinctive social functions (p. 21). Once standardized, this societal scheme became solidified and resilient, as attested to by an extraordinary number of religious and secular texts written between the 9th and 16th centuries. Alan of Lille (d. 1203), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400), Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464), and Martin Luther (1483-1546) all quoted here that fruitfully support Vignjević's point.

As claimed in "The Depictions of the Three Orders," the trifunctional scheme of society was translated into the visual arts of the 15th and 16th centuries. At that time, social uprisings and peasants' rebellions were widespread in Europe. Vignjević explains that the three-order motif condensed the political ideology of authority and subordination among the estates (p. 41). Thus, pictures of this subject could be used by the proponents of the leading classes to remind the *tertius ordo* of their place in society (p. 44). While this explanation seems plausible, it risks being too general. What kind of depictions is the author discussing? Are they prints, illuminations, or paintings? Where were these images displayed and who were the beholders? Furthermore, at this stage of the book, the readers might wish for an overview and a classification of the iconographic types of the three-



Figure 1 One of the woodcuts of the three orders from Johannes Lichtberger's *Pronosticatio in latino*. Photo: after T. Vignjević, *Depictions of the Three Orders and Estates around the Year 1500: Triplex Status Mundi*, p. 73

order images that Vignjević will investigate in his book, but the author does not provide a clear outline of the variety of art works covered in each of the six following chapters.

“Two Examples from the High Middle Ages” is a problematic chapter, because the author is unsuccessful in explaining how this section fits into the overarching discourse of his work. Vignjević presents two illuminations from *The Chronicle of John and Florence of Worcester* (12th century) and one from the *Image du Monde* by Gossouin de Metz (13th century) as “extremely rare depictions” of the three orders from the High Middle Ages (p. 51). The readers are left unsatisfied since the only information in this two-page chapter is limited to a quick visual description of the illuminations.

Conversely, “The Illustrations in *Pronosticatio in latino* by Johannes Lichtenberger and Their Influence,” offers the most effective examination of depictions of the three orders in Vignjević’s work. The focus is a series of woodcuts from a 16th-century astrological manual, composed by Johannes Lichtenberger, astrologer of the emperor Frederick III. **(Fig. 1)** Vignjević nourishes the formal analysis of these prints with a compelling iconographical comparison between the three-order society pattern and the Last Judgment theme. In the woodcuts from *Pronosticatio in latino*, clergy and nobility hold a privileged position closer to Christ. The peasants, forced to work the soil, are the farthest from Christ at the bottom of the print. Vignjević keenly observes that this organization of the three estates resembles the iconography of Christ the Judge, who elevates the elect while pushing away the unworthy (pp. 57-58).

In the sixth chapter “The Depictions in the Translation of Boccaccio by Laurent de Premierfait,” the author demonstrates that representations of the three-order scheme

gradually withdrew from the strict feudal-based classification of estates and moved instead towards a version that more closely resembled the composition of 15th-century society. This was made especially evident in depictions of the third estate (*laboratores*). To support this argument, Vignjević scrutinizes a series of French illuminated manuscripts of *Le Livre de Jean Bocace des Cas des nobles hommes et femmes* by Laurent de Premierfait (1409). **(Fig. 2)** In his prologue, de Premierfait describes the world and its estates according to the canonical structure of society: the clergy, the nobility, and the peasants. In the illuminations accompanying his text, however, the *ordo laboratores* comprises artisans and merchants alongside peasants. Vignjević convincingly asserts that this nuanced representation of the third estate was applied by illuminators or their advisers to illustrate a more adequate image of the society of their time (p. 103). It is a pity that this intriguing point is not addressed further.

“The Estates in the Works of Albrecht Dürer and His Age,” shifts the focus back to prints of the three orders and their capacity to convey a critical social message. This seventh chapter examines printed cycle of Dürer’s Apocalypse which primarily included representatives of the ruling classes among the victims of the divine punishment of humanity. As rightly proposed by the author, Dürer’s insistent visual reference to the members of the clergy criticized their role in society (108). Similarly, the following chapter “Other Depictions of the Three Estates,” considers the condemnation of the wrongdoing and vice of all social orders. Among the images examined by Vignjević is *The Land of Cockaigne* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, painted in 1567. In this painting, a peasant, a priest, and a knight lie on the ground in a land of plenty. Their stomachs are bulging with food.



Figure 2 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Des Cas de nobles hommes et femmes*, transl by Laurent de Premierfait, illustrated by the Talbot Master, France (1440) BL Royal 18 D VII f. 2. Photo: British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts <https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IID=47978>

Through his work, Bruegel sent a moralizing message: greed and laziness were vices that concerned all the representatives of the estates and, per extension, the whole society of the 16th century (p. 120).

“Alternative Depictions of the Divisions of the Estates” concludes Vignjević’s exploration of visual representations of the three-order society. This chapter presents an interesting insight into how the three orders were often intertwined with other imagery in order to promote a moralizing and satirical message of society. The Chess game, the Wheel of Fortune, the Tree of Estates, and the Dance of Death are some of the iconographies covered here. For instance, the copper engraving *Memento mori* by Israhel van Meckenem shows members of the estates accompanied by skeletons, recalling the Dance of Death motif and reflecting its idea of social equality in death (p. 128).

Overall, *Depictions of the Three Orders and Estates around the Year 1500: Triplex Status Mundi* is a well-researched work, solidly grounded in an investigation of textual sources and images. Nonetheless, the readers may feel overwhelmed by the large number of visual examples presented and might argue for a clearer taxonomy of these depictions. It is unfortunate that there are typographical errors scattered throughout the book. Terms and passages in Latin are not consistently provided along with their English translation and primary and secondary sources are not always properly cited in the footnotes. Image reproductions of the prints, illuminations, and paintings discussed by the author are accompanied by incomplete captions or even are sometimes missing altogether. Despite these editorial flaws, Vignjević’s study is an ambitious undertaking. It will appeal to specialists and students alike who wish to explore the trifunctional scheme of the three

orders as a poignant visual and cultural model that defined European society throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. 🐼