



Edited by Peter Arnade, Martha Howell, and Anton van der Lem

Rereading Huizinga

Autumn of the Middle Ages,
a Century Later

Amsterdam
University
Press

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AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Portrait of Huizinga, drawing in pencil by Harm H. Kamerlingh Onnes
Signed in the upper right corner: J. HUIZINGA AET. 64



Academic Historical Museum, Leiden

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Cover illustration: Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, detail

Source: London, National Gallery

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 372 4

e-ISBN 978 90 4853 409 8 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462983724

NUR 684

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Amsterdam 2019

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Acknowledgements

This collection of essays, timed to coincide with the centennial anniversary of Huizinga's 1919 *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*, began as a lively conference held at Flanders House in New York City in 2016. Organized by Columbia University's Studies of the Dutch-Speaking World program and its European Institute, and cosponsored by Columbia's Department of History, the General Delegation of the Government of Flanders to the USA and the Consulate General of The Netherlands in New York, the conference assembled historians, art historians, and literary scholars from across the globe to consider the intellectual culture in which Huizinga wrote and to examine his book's legacy in the century since its publication. We are grateful to Matthew Jones of Columbia University's Department of History, whose original and expert comments on the day's proceedings and on Huizinga's *Autumn* more generally provided a perfect coda to the workshop. The formal papers delivered at the conference are included in this volume, along with another by Willem Otterspeer, who graciously added an epilogue to the collection.

Amsterdam University Press invited us to publish this book and provided crucial support and help in the process. We thank Inge van der Bijl for her early encouragement, and Julie Benschop-Plokker for her steady editorial hand and guidance. Deborah Shulevitz provided crucial help with editing as we readied the essays for this volume. Anton van der Lem is one of this volume's contributors, but his role went much further. As a leading Huizinga expert, he offered his unparalleled knowledge and assistance to the entire project. He also very generously helped to prepare the final manuscript, pulled together a single bibliography from our essays' separate ones, and prepared the index as well. His role was therefore fundamental and his aid extraordinarily generous.

Introduction

Peter Arnade and Martha Howell

In 2016 in an interview for the *New York Times*, the American science writer Mary Roach recalled that Johan Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages* was the most challenging book she had read as a college student in the 1970s:

I was memorably tormented by *The Waning of the Middle Ages* by Johan Huizinga. But wait! I just did an Amazon 'Look Inside' to reacquaint myself. It's good! He opens describing the sights and sounds of village life:

The modern town hardly knows silence or darkness in their purity, nor the effect of a solitary light or a single distant cry. Here he is on the tolling of church bells, which were known by their names: big Jacqueline, or the bell Roland. Everyone knew the difference in meaning of the various ways of ringing. [...] What intoxication the pealing of the bells of all the churches, and of all the monasteries of Paris, must have produced [...] when a peace was concluded or a pope elected.

I was an idiot.¹

Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen, published in 1919, and translated into English both as *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924) and *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1996), is a century old. It remains one of the most enduring books of medieval European history and with recent editions in Korean, Mandarin and Japanese, it now is a truly global phenomenon, not just a 'must read' on syllabuses in the United States and Europe. Huizinga himself was one of the Netherlands' most famous academics – nominated repeatedly in his lifetime for a Nobel Prize. He was also a gifted writer; the eleventh edition of the standard Dutch dictionary Van Dale contained a remarkable 282 attributions to Huizinga, most of them from *Autumn*. When he died

¹ Roach, 'By the Book'.

three months before the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945, Huizinga had become a renowned essayist concerned with the shattered world of mid-twentieth-century Europe. He had also written *Homo ludens* (1938), his wholly original study of play motifs in human history and societies, which became a foundational text in game theory.

The reputation and readership of *Autumn* grew by leaps and bounds in the decades after his death. It was translated first into German and English (1924), Swedish (1927), then into Spanish (1930), and finally into French (1932), by which time the book's reputation began to take off. By the 1970s, thanks in part to new editions of the various translations, to the abridged 1924 translation into English by Frits Hopman (with Huizinga's cooperation), and the issuance of a cheap paperback edition the book gained a popular readership. The 1924 Hopman English translation and the 1932 French translation also substituted 'Waning' and 'Decline' for 'Autumn', even though the latter more accurately reflected the Dutch neologism Huizinga had employed in 1919: *Herfsttij*, or Autumn-tide. Huizinga himself approved of the revised usage in the two translations because he had come by that time to regret his original title and believed designations such as decline and waning better captured his thesis about the dusk of the middle ages. Despite Huizinga's mixed feelings about the book's original title, *Herfsttij's* reprint in France (1975) and a new translation in the United States (1996) both restored 'Autumn' to the title.

Notwithstanding its fame, a century after its publication *Autumn* remains more read by those outside the academic field of the Burgundian Low Countries and northern France than those in it. Indeed, as Mary Roach's comment reveals – and as similar remarks by countless students and scholars over the past century have echoed – the book is in some ways hard going. The problem is not, however, its readability. It is a pleasure to accompany Huizinga as he recreates the sights and sounds of the medieval town, as in the passage quoted by Mary Roach, or as he selects passages from chronicles, poetry, and other literary texts to display the joys, anxieties, and dreams of the Burgundian elites who are his principal subjects, or as he stands, awestruck, before the meticulously rendered portraits drawn by the Van Eycks and other so-called Flemish Primitives (*Primitifs flamands*). The problem is that the text ignores practically all the rules of scholarship in any of the fields through which he seems so randomly to roam – history, sociology, anthropology, art history. The book seems to fit nowhere, to tell a story that explores no aspect of the place and age systematically enough for other scholars to build upon, and to leave out so much that the whole he provides seems to distort rather than illuminate the age.

This volume, which follows from a workshop that featured early versions of the articles included here, guides the twenty-first-century reader through this extraordinary text. After reviewing the reasons for the book's decidedly mixed reception by scholars then and even now, we place the book in Huizinga's time and place and analyze Huizinga's methodology, relating it to his purposes in writing the book. In a final section we discuss the ways that Huizinga not only anticipated disciplinary changes that have occurred during the last century but also helped generate those changes, and we close by arguing that the book has important lessons for scholars and students today. In sum, this volume does not seek to restore a reputation, for *Autumn's* fame has not diminished over the last century. Rather, its goal is to explain why, despite all the book's flaws, all its omissions and unevenness, *Autumn* is considered one of the masterpieces of Western historical scholarship.

1

It is easy to identify *Autumn's* weaknesses and to agree with those scholars and students who have been mystified by its style, uncertain about its bold claims, and frustrated by its disregard for scholarly protocols. Despite his claim that Flemish painting was the book's inspiration, Huizinga relied almost entirely on published French-language literary and narrative sources for his evidence – this in a region that was multilingual and where archival material would have yielded a much wider variety of sources, much of them in Middle Dutch, Latin, or even German and many of them penned or read by people his sources never touched. His references to late medieval art were idiosyncratic and highly selective. He paid little attention to civic life in what was one of Europe's most densely urbanized regions, concentrating almost exclusively on the court of the Burgundian dukes and the elites who populated it. He almost completely ignored commerce – an astonishing omission given that this was the home of some of the period's most powerful commercial cities, whose riches directly fed the court on which he concentrated. He seemed to dismiss the religious fervor of the day as a calcified expression of decayed spirituality rather than an early sign of the Reformation(s) to come. He cited only a few secondary historical studies and directly referenced little of the important work in sociology or anthropology that was then revolutionizing (if not giving birth to) these social sciences. Last, even though he had training in philology and was no stranger to the rules of *Quellenforschung* then ascendant in historical scholarship (as demonstrated in his earlier work on medieval charters in Haarlem), his *Autumn* overlooks any such principles.

No wonder then that Dutch medievalists paid little attention to the book. As Peter Arnade, Marc Boone, Walter Simons, and Myriam Greilsammer point out in this volume, Dutch medieval studies were still in their infancy and struggling to become 'more scientific' in the Von Rankean mode, and the book's disregard of those protocols gave it no entry, not even in Huizinga's own country. Attitudes in Belgium, Simons further explains, were predictably divided along confessional lines: historians at the Catholic University of Louvain took no interest in a book that displayed the brittleness of medieval Catholic piety, whereas at the University of Ghent, traditionally rather anticlerical, the 'Pirenne school of Medieval History' was embarking on its grand projects in the history of economic and social life, politics and legal institutions, subjects left aside in *Herfsttij*. The founders of the French *Annales* school, although in many ways more sympathetic to Huizinga's book (which they had to read in German, the French not being made available until 1932) also had reservations because, as Myriam Greilsammer details, Huizinga gave socioeconomic matters so little attention and because he seemed only to describe emotions rather than explain them with the help of cultural psychology or sociological theory. In fact, although at first both Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the founders of the *Annales* school and the journal that bears its name, thought Huizinga might be closer to their research interests than he in fact was, as the correspondence among them that Greilsammer examined reveals. Invitations for Huizinga to contribute to the *Annales* journal never materialized into an actual submission, though Huizinga offered several possible subjects for a potential essay, including one on the play element, clearly adumbrating *Homo ludens*. It was only later, in the 1970s, as we will discuss, that Huizinga's book was embraced by a newer generation of *Annalistes*.

Art historians were even more indifferent. As Diane Wolfthal observes, initially they were slow to give the book serious attention, in large measure because Huizinga himself did not immerse himself in the literature of the field as he prepared his study. Instead, he worked impressionistically, using different artworks to support his central point that the art of the era was an idealistic flight from reality, even if its exact renderings of daily life were things of great achievement. No surprise then that leading scholars of the era like Aby Warburg did not engage the book's arguments about Flemish art, even if he did acknowledge the volume.

Yet, although *Autumn of the Middle Ages* found no comfortable home among the scholars of his day, the book is in some ways very much of its time, both of the age and of a moment in Huizinga's own intellectual trajectory. Although *Autumn* drew more heavily on late medieval literature than it

did on art, it was in fact late medieval art, and painting in particular, that inspired Huizinga to prepare his study. Carol Symes, Birger Vanwesenbeeck and Diane Wolfthal, among others, all make clear the effect the famous 1902 exhibit of Flemish Primitives in Bruges had upon Huizinga. The exhibit had been an effort of the still young Belgian state to stake out a national cultural past and identity by claiming the glories of medieval Flemish painting as its ancestry – in direct competition with Flemish nationalists and Pan-Germanic ethnonationalists who regarded these artworks as their own heritage. Huizinga, however, intended to free art of such political or social purposes, keeping it out of the story of nationalism and nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century politics, and locate it in what he referred to as the ‘century of the Van Eycks’ (his shorthand for southern Low Country painting, manuscript illumination and sculpture) and its significance for Burgundian history. Carol Symes’s essay in this volume pursues this argument, explaining that Huizinga abhorred the corrosive nationalism of his era and made it plain as early as *Autumn*, long before his later, well-known role as a social critic of the mid-twentieth century and the destructive effects of European nationalism. His book of 1919 ignored borders and moved across regions; written by a Dutchman and focused on Francophone sources, it flatly refused to place medieval history in the service of nationalism.

Huizinga’s close contemporary, Henri Pirenne in Ghent, was no ardent nationalist either, but his multivolume history of Belgium did, as Symes notes, provide the Belgian state with a cohesive narrative of its Middle Ages. Marc Boone explores the intricate professional and personal relationship between Pirenne and Huizinga through their body of work and personal correspondence. Very different historians with distinct interests and temperaments, they viewed the Valois dukes of Burgundy differently, as both openly acknowledged. For Pirenne, the fifteenth-century dukes created the administrative and political infrastructure for the vibrant commercial society that sowed the seeds of the two nineteenth-century nation-states of Belgium and the Netherlands. Huizinga also acknowledged the fundamental contribution of the dukes of Burgundy, but saw their success more in galvanizing a sense of Burgundian identity distinct from the late medieval French monarchy and not so much in political or institutional terms. For Huizinga, Burgundy did not adumbrate Belgium and certainly not the Netherlands, even if both countries and their histories were shaped by the legacy of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As Boone rightly points out, neither Pirenne nor Huizinga was a specialist of the Burgundian period, but they managed to bequeath to subsequent scholars two of the most important visions of what the Valois dukes achieved, thereby setting

the terms of all subsequent scholarship on the history and nature of this region and its links to the modern age.

Although Huizinga's book is clearly situated – and indirectly situates itself – in the charged politics of early-twentieth-century nationalisms and competing claims to the medieval past, *Autumn* also reflects other aspects of Huizinga's intellectual milieu. As both Carol Symes and Birger Vanwesenbeeck discuss, Huizinga's attraction to the late-nineteenth-century Symbolist movement might well have influenced his thinking about the late medieval Burgundian era as a close to an era. Both rightly point to George Rodenbach's 1892 novella *Bruges-la-morte*. Serialized in the French newspaper *Le figaro*, it featured a widower protagonist who mourns his late wife by withdrawing to Bruges and cherishing the city's late medieval timbre of melancholy and nostalgia in its old canals and buildings. Bruges was also, not coincidentally, the site of the 1902 Flemish Primitives exhibit. Vanwesenbeeck's essay allows us not only to see these intellectual connections but also to better read Huizinga, to understand his fascination with late periods, his immersion in the style of the time he wrote about, and his effort to make time stand still as a way of dealing with ends and beginnings.

Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Jan Dumolyn, along with Symes, Vanwesenbeeck and Simons, point to another connection between Huizinga and the intellectual culture of his day: late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century German historiography, in particular the hermeneutics of scholars like Wilhelm Dilthey. *Autumn* registers this influence in its focus on aesthetics and sensation or what Huizinga called the 'forms' of thought through which the Burgundians expressed their understanding of their world. Lecuppre-Desjardin and Dumolyn connect this approach even to Huizinga's treatment of urban society; although they acknowledge that he read urbanity through the disparaging comments made by elites of the day, exiled it to the north and the Dutch state that would emerge more than a century later, or even completely ignored it, Huizinga did, however, provide a connection between the courtly world he studied and cities like Bruges. Urban elites, he argued, had absorbed and put to their own uses the 'forms' of chivalric society, thus borrowing from the court its aesthetics and rituals for their own purposes.

Huizinga's treatment of religion even more clearly reflects his own history. Huizinga had much to say about late medieval religion, especially the excesses he perceived in actual practice, with mind-numbing numbers of rites and rituals in the devotional calendar, with raw displays of emotion, and with the wide gulf between formal theology and worship itself. As both Walter Simons and Andrew Brown observe, in part Huizinga's attitudes about

late medieval religion had something to do with his Mennonite upbringing; his critical position toward Catholic religious practice reflects a typical Protestant stance. But as Simons explores further, it had also to do with his personal conviction that religion should posit a moral order of piety and transcendence, and that the routine and overexcited performances of faith described in *Autumn* betrayed that essence. As Simons also points out, even in Huizinga's early work on Buddhism, he attended to the gulf between its foundational beliefs and original cosmology and its evolution in practice over time, where ceremonialism and ritual orders similarly evolved, where holy men and women and others turned the religion in new directions, away from its spiritual core and toward material enactments of its forms.

Given Huizinga's debts to hermeneutical approaches, if not to related philosophical studies themselves, and his resultant emphasis on aesthetics and sensations, given his own studies and experience of religion, and given his love of art and literature, it is perhaps no wonder that his book focused on what he called the 'forms' of thought that governed the experience of late medieval Burgundian elites. No wonder too, given that the cultural forms he studied were, he thought, corrosive of medieval courtly society, that he emphasized the decay and attrition of these forms, the bizarre, almost frenzied, play of opposites. Huizinga interpreted the patterns as symptoms of a large dynamic at play in the Burgundian territories: the gulf between the reality of a late medieval world grim with conflict and violence and the desire in art, literature and ritual for a world without either, a world of beauty and perfection. This fundamental contrast animates the structure of *Autumn* as a book, as it does much of Huizinga's work, which, as Willem Otterspeer so rightly observes, is built upon the play of contrasts.² It is not, and Huizinga did not intend it to be, a portrait of Burgundian society writ large. Political events, economic structure and patterns, institutional histories, wars and treaties, ecclesiastical matters – all the usual stuff of history books – were not on his agenda. Rather, he sought to describe and to understand the meaning of texts, whether literary, visual or even aural, and their impact on cultural behavior in the Burgundian court where a heightened, if overwrought, formalism took root.

Thus Huizinga relied so heavily on chronicles and verse; in these writings he could apprehend most tangibly attitude and mood that reflected subjective voice. As Graeme Small makes clear, most of Huizinga's sources were necessarily Francophone because Huizinga wanted to apprehend the sensibility of the Burgundian court itself, where the language was almost

2 Otterspeer, *Reading Huizinga*.

exclusively French. Small's essay carefully enumerates these sources, revealing how selectively Huizinga chose, turning especially to Chastelain, La Marche, Monstrelet and other court chroniclers and poets, always in search of the language that expressed what he considered the best examples of the anguish and the aspirations of this rarefied society. It naturally followed that Huizinga ignored Middle Dutch sources though he knew very well that there existed a substantial body of such literature, and knew, too, that the chambers of rhetoric, to take one example, had produced a significant body of written work. But urban Dutch sources to Huizinga were *burgerlijk*, the seeds of early modern Dutch history, and not essential to the Burgundian realm, even if they were part of it. His working methods mirror his concerns. As Anton van der Lem details, in the Huizinga archive in the Leiden University Library, there are 330 envelopes of Huizinga's notes for *Autumn*, filled with strips (*snippers*) of horizontally cut paper upon which Huizinga wrote quotes and made notes, which he assembled according to subject and theme. The hundreds of envelopes and strips within them reveal a scholar moving freely and widely across a body of printed sources that were produced and circulated within one slice of a complex society, organizing them in a systematic but kaleidoscope fashion.

2

Huizinga's text, as rooted as it is in the period in which he lived, also provides a more specific set of arguments about the fifteenth-century North and the Burgundian world he studied that have endured long beyond his day, and in fact have yielded fruit in many branches of historical scholarship. One of Huizinga's shrewdest points was the power of chivalry and its ethos. As Andrew Brown points out, while scholars no longer read the Burgundian attachment to chivalry as a retreat into an archaic medieval ideal, they do now, as they once did not, take seriously the rituals and literature of chivalry the Burgundian dukes, aristocrats and even urban merchants championed, just as Lecuppre-Desjardin and Dumolyn noted. As Brown also shows, Huizinga's careful consideration of Burgundian chivalry, and court ritual more generally, laid the groundwork for his later work on the 'play element' in history, but more generally, for historians to take up the study of ritual as a political and cultural form.

Huizinga's vision of the Burgundian court as a power center of an elaborately constructed world of high ceremony and literary and artistic production has also inspired a large body of scholarship on the late medieval court

as a vehicle of political and cultural patronage and identity making. Larry Silver's contribution in this volume explores the affinities between Emperor Maximilian's German court at the beginning of the sixteenth century and the Burgundian court on whose model he – and other princes to come – would draw. Silver traces the connections between Franco-Burgundian and German court traditions from the early fifteenth century to the sixteenth, when they culminated in Maximilian's perfection of the theater state model. What is more, Maximilian became the vehicle for Habsburg dynasty's wholesale incorporation of the Burgundian chivalric heritage, including the Order of the Golden Fleece, and its court ceremonial in their early modern territories.

These moves, as Peter Arnade demonstrates, identify Huizinga as an anthropologist *avant la lettre*, even a scholar who anticipates symbolic anthropology, especially the work of Clifford Geertz. In this sense, Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, and his landmark *Homo ludens*, have a more contemporary aspect to them, even if their language and intellectual shape are of Huizinga's era. Geertz strove to move anthropology past the obligations of social scientific categories. Instead of the enumeration of the organizing principles of a society, Geertz foregrounded how language and cultural practices spin 'webs of signification' by which meaning is produced in human societies. Although Huizinga hardly operated with a mature theory of signification as did Geertz, some historians have explicitly noted the Geertzian element in Huizinga's *Autumn*. In 1985, Wim Blockmans and Walter Prevenier, for example, drew on one of Geertz's most celebrated books to describe late medieval Burgundy as a 'theater state'.³ Although the court Geertz described was quite unlike the Burgundian, Huizinga did introduce to medieval history the idea that the court was a performative act, the charismatic center that modeled power and comportment to its clients and subjects. As Arnade more fully adumbrates in his article, Huizinga's freshness as an early theorist of court ceremony is remarkable.

Huizinga's attention to devotional practices and ritual was never systematic, but these themes were clearly enough explored in *Autumn* to also anticipate, even help to inspire, the large body of scholarship that developed in the 1970s onward on late medieval religion most clearly associated with practitioners of the Annales school's cultural turn in Europe and North America. Simons in particular rightly notes that the whole field of the history of emotions, both in the study of religion and elsewhere, owes much to *Autumn*. Another of Huizinga's most important contributions is his use of literary and artistic sources in *Autumn*, exemplifying an interdisciplinary

3 Blockmans and Prevenier, *Burgundian Netherlands*.

spirit in 1919 that would become much more standard practice in medieval history and other fields after the cultural turn of the 1970s. As is well known, Huizinga had deep artistic interests through his life, was a patron of music, literature and art, and in his youth was an eager advocate of the so-called 1880 Movement, an 'arts for art's sake' celebration of aesthetics.

Huizinga's book had a much more direct effect on the scholars associated with the Annales school, as both Simons and Greilsammer explain, but not until the 1970s when French historians like Jacques Le Goff and his colleagues revived interest in Huizinga. It is ironic that it was the successive generations of the Annales school that has since kept *Autumn* on the intellectual front burner, but considerably more so in France, England and the United States than in Belgium and the Netherlands. It is only in recent years, and more in the Netherlands, where Huizinga is now celebrated as one of the twentieth century's leading intellectuals, than in Belgium, where Pirenne holds pride of place, that scholars treat this book as more than an aberrant, if brilliant, piece of historical writing.

Huizinga not only launched a series of arguments or suggested methodological routes that have informed scholarship since his time, he also left us with tools for rethinking Burgundian society and its period. Andrew Brown's essay, for example, invites us to think about ritual as a form of play. While Huizinga may have in this respect been anticipating his later *Homo ludens*, scholars today can reread medieval ritual through the analytical lens provided by that study, thereby deepening our understanding of how and why ritual forms work. Jun Cho suggests another way to reread Huizinga. He shows how Huizinga's attention to the cultural tropes of the late medieval Burgundian court could be pushed further to penetrate the commercial themes embedded within them. Cho specifically tackles the relationship between commerce and the Burgundian court (a subject Huizinga ignored) by describing what writers then and since have understood as *magnificence*: the prince's obligation and ability to 'perform great deeds' and to appear as capable of such deeds, which included, of course, military prowess but also displays of grandeur befitting (and constitutive of) a prince able to provide for the common good. By returning us to the concept of the performative court described by Huizinga and analyzed by scholars such as Blockmans and Prevenier, Cho, like Brown in his essay, proves the value of Huizinga's attention to courtly discourse and ritual but reverses their understanding of them. For Cho, the 'forms' that in *Autumn* appear so superannuated were in fact enactments not just of the artifice affecting courtly culture but also displays, even perhaps self-conscious displays, of the commercial wealth on which the court depended.

Huizinga also provides us sharper perspective on the Italian Renaissance, at least as described in Burckhardt's famous *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (*Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*) of 1860, a book to which *Autumn* was in many ways a response. The Dutchman holds up a Burgundian mirror to the Italian Renaissance and invites us to see how little the latter's likeness is altered when we do so. Burgundy, Huizinga confidently asserts, did not so much presage the Renaissance as mark the end of the prior era. It was, in Small's words, 'the supernova of the Middle Ages, increasingly incapable of bearing the crushing weight of its own gravity, brilliantly foreshadowing the black hole into which all that was medieval eventually disappeared'.

Historians today, just as those of Huizinga's own time, are not convinced by this, the book's main claim; the portrait he paints is, they know, incomplete, his sources too homogeneous and his literary style too elusive. But they now rightly consider the book an enthralling study of a cultural moment so far from our own sensibilities that it can seem otherworldly. The book is also now recognized as a methodological wonder – not in some linear way a precursor of contemporary cultural studies, it is a completely original attempt to treat cultural forms and the materials that express them as reliable, if inherently imbalanced, historical evidence. It is also a cautionary tale about the politics of history-writing and a constructive reminder that the sources left by an age are all we have to make sense of it. A hundred years after *Autumn*'s publication, readers still have much to learn from the book, and many reasons to keep rereading it.

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