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The Shifting Importance of Being Brothers (and Sisters)

In this volume, Christopher Black and Pamela Gravestock present essays delivered at the 2003 Renaissance Society of America annual meeting in Toronto. The editors had an admirable three part goal. While acknowledging the well-recognized fact that confraternities constituted a significant element in religious and social life in early modern Europe, they hoped first to trace the complex evolution in those institutions over the course of the early modern period, roughly from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Second, they intended to illustrate the importance of these institutions outside of Italy, the place where study of confraternity life has traditionally been focused. Third, they planned to provide some coverage of the findings of historians who have examined the history of confraternities in the Americas. They have also hoped, obviously, to encourage further investigation along all three lines enumerated above. As with most collections of essays, especially brief ones like these derived from conference papers, the editors' goals are partly but not fully realized.

The contributors to this volume have demonstrated that confraternities were vibrant, living communities developing in complex, inconsistent ways across the early modern era. Roisin Cossar, in an interesting piece on confraternities in late medieval Bergamo, argued that there were changing views of the poor among members of confraternities designed to serve them, and even some wide variation in the reactions of poor Bergamese to confraternal assistance programs. Stepping outside of the traditional hospital focus of many historians who have analyzed Venetian confraternities, Andrea Vianello examined parish associations there in the seventeenth century. Vianello found a decline of interest in parish-centered fraternal groups that promoted incarceration and used rules for the administration of relief that discriminated between "deserving" and "undeserving" members of the underclass. At the same time, confraternities in Venice developed increasing concern with

the mission of religious education for the poor. Shifting interest of another sort was the subject of Anna Beth Rousakis in her essay on confraternal chapel decoration in Bologna. She found that local politics, not to mention the devotional agenda of patrons, contributed to the modification of decorative schemes designed to evoke responses from viewers. Gravestock contributed a piece illustrating that the blending of devotional traditions was common among confraternities created to comfort prisoners on their way to execution. These groups used *laude* (devotional songs) and *tavolette* (double-sided panels with painted devotional images) to provide a sort of narcotic, and to remind the condemned of their opportunity to imitate Christ through the execution that awaited them. Black provided an article arguing that creativity and independence were traits of confraternities in negotiating their place in early modern society, reminding us that their adaptability extended far beyond the choice of devotional messages. The late sixteenth-century confraternity of San Polo in Venice he described was one, apparently, that creatively subverted attempts by episcopal and parish authorities to control it.

While all of the essays described above focus on Italy, other contributors provided attention to confraternity life elsewhere and reported largely the same thing: complex, vibrantly developing religious and cultural institutions. In early modern Ireland, for instance, Colm Lennon found that there were two considerably different organizational models for confraternities. He indicated that political and demographic realities affected the way confraternities were organized and operated. Some lordships in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Ireland had both an English urban colony and a larger autonomous Gaelic region. In these two zones, confraternities were markedly different. In the English-style parish communities, confraternities run by the laity flourished. Such organization did not apparently work in rural Gaelic zones, where confraternal activity tended to revolve instead

around growing observant reform groups and their third orders. Anne-Laure Van Bruaene found some organizations in the low countries called “chambers of rhetoric” that amounted to confraternities, but whose devotion was to the production of vernacular poetry and plays. Their success, according to Van Bruaene, created concerns they shared with the urban middling class: a commitment to the idea that laymen should have an independent place in constructing their religious life, to the ideal of social harmony, and to the utility of competition. Dylan Reid studied the confraternity in Rouen dedicated to the Immaculate Conception between 1486 and 1610, and found that it bridged divergent groups among the elite in that early modern city. Persons on both sides of the civil conflict known as the French Wars of Religion were members of this confraternity, linked by its traditional devotional activity (actually incorporating a friendly poetry contest). Many of its members apparently did not approve of the efforts of some others to turn it into an intense, anti-Protestant organization. This made the Rouen confraternity, at least for a time, a rather different sort of confraternity from others in contemporary France, especially those established to combat Protestantism.

Two essays presented here, one each on the viceroyalty of Peru and on Ecuador in the colonial era, show the need for further research on confraternities and their impact in the Americas. Emma Sardo contributed a piece on the development, beginning in 1583, of the cult of the Virgin of Copacabana (on Lake Titicaca in Peru) and the subsequent formation of the confraternity of Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria in Potosí (in modern Bolivia). The miracles associated with the image of the Virgin in Copacabana and the story of an apparition of the Virgin in Potosí contributed to the development of confraternities in both places. These institutions were used as instruments of instruction in Christian doctrine and employed by clergy with the local population. Sardo found tantalizing records from testaments detailing pious bequests to the confraternity in Potosí. Further research will surely be needed to clarify the tale and plumb the significance of the cult and confraternities. Susan Verdi Webster wrote on confraternities that helped produce monumental architecture in colonial Ecuador in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her examination of three construction commissions made by local confraternities in Quito illustrate that the organizations varied widely in their activities and served different devotional focal points. What they shared was considerable financial, not to mention spiritual, power, plus an apparently vigorous competitive streak. These patterns, Webster correctly concluded, warrant further investigation

and contextualization.

This collection suffers from a most typical problem associated with conference proceedings: inconsistency. One less than satisfying piece is Paul Trio’s very brief essay on urban devotion in Flanders in the later Middle Ages. It is fairly saturated with tired commonplaces like the lay person trying “to escape the ecclesiastical yoke” (p. 54), but at the same time, this person was one who nonetheless was able to penetrate clerical confraternities. What Trio fails to provide is an evidence supported explanation of how the burdensome yoke was slipped. The proponents of the laicization he described began to, as he said, “display some more ‘secular’ characteristics” (p. 58), but readers will be frustrated looking for evidence to support the claim. An essay by Nerida Newbigin seems rather out of place. She reviewed studies of confraternal drama, but with a heavy secondary agenda: she designed the article to demonstrate to university accrediting auditors that research on the topic is relevant for curriculum and the national scholarly agenda. Some of the pieces are a bit inconsistent in themselves. Cossar made a nice contribution on the activity of the Confraternity of the Sacred Heart in Bergamo, but her explanation seems thin. When the confraternity provided dowry funds to some clients, Cossar claimed that this effectively defined the social rank of needy girls, but did not explain how. In addition, reference to the seminal works of Julius Kirshner and Anthony Molho on dowry funds and their social implications is omitted altogether. Some of the conclusions here too are better than others. Cossar correctly indicated that confraternity records show an ambivalent attitude toward the poor, but in the claim that such associations “controlled the poor rather than freeing them” (p. 88), an ahistorical agenda emerges. Sardo contributed an article that will interest many, but it is really more about the development of the cult than it is about the confraternities in the viceroyalty of Peru. Staying in the colonial world, Webster wrote an essay with better conclusions than most in this collection, but she presents confraternal decorative art performing miracles, when surely she meant that confraternity members and others attributed reported miracles to the images. Taken together, Sardo’s and Webster’s pieces mean that two of the fifteen contributions have the Americas as their subject, and hence the title of the volume is a bit misleading. Some of the best contributions are the broader ones by Barbara Wisch, Black, and Nicholas Terpstra. Wisch reviewed art historical literature on confraternities and reminded readers of the nearly universal membership of artists and artisans in one or more confraternities. Black provided a solid overview of the context in which confra-

ternities developed and hinted at some of the complexities that demand further investigation. Best of all is Terpstra's essay on "de-institutionalizing" confraternity studies. In this wide-ranging synthesis, he persuasively argued that fraternalism in the early modern world became a tool for mobilizing solidarity that "could be simultaneously transformative and reactionary, egalitarian and elitist, a vehicle of resistance or of acculturation" (p. 277). For any serious student of the early modern period, this phrase will surely ring a bell. There is another contem-

porary ideology capable of simultaneously inspiring such contradictory impulses: reform. Fraternalism may be, in the long run, just as important for early modern history as the concept of reform. These final three, in one way or another, all make the same point: it is crucial to incorporate fully the record of confraternal organizations into the religious, social and cultural history of the early modern world. The volume presents research initiatives that help move us toward that necessary goal.

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