

Judith C. Brown, Robert C. Davis, eds. *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*. London and New York: Longman, 1998. xi + 255 pp. \$59.40 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29326-7; \$167.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-29325-0.

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A Gendered Lens On The Renaissance

From its intriguing front cover to its valuable footnotes, *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy* is a vibrant and scholarly addition to a growing body of work in Renaissance Studies which uses the work of Joan Scott (and others) on the socially-constructed category of gender as a powerful analytical tool for historical investigation. [1] Beginning with a substantive and lucid introduction by co-editor Judith C. Brown, this anthology goes about fruitfully employing Scott's approach to develop a richer and more complex understanding of the lives of women (and men) within the time period known as the Italian Renaissance. What emerges is a watershed course correction to a generation of scholarship that has been rather relentlessly bleak in regard to the lot of Renaissance women, especially patrician urban elites, in what would become an increasingly closed, oligarchic, and patriarchal culture. [2] In part, of course, this line of scholarship had been a hearty encore to Joan Kelly's 1978 essay which had asked the question, "Did women even HAVE a Renaissance?" in response to Jacob Burckhardt's by-now infamous declaration of 1860, that "in the Renaissance, women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men." [3] Of course, Kelly's answer had been a categorical "no" and inspired a vanguard of feminist scholars, who set out resolutely to demonstrate the impossibility of such a pronouncement, and who produced, in their zeal, an historical perspective of Renaissance Italian women often as bleak as Burckhardt's had been rosy.[4] This lively anthology of ten chapters however, written by a new third generation of historians, tempers the historical dystopia which resulted, and it includes some of the best scholars

working in the field today.

The ten essays provide an energetic synthesis of the big sweep of new scholarship from the 1980s and 90s, organized around major historical categories. Included here is also both a useful glossary of terms at the outset and a valuable suggested selection of further readings at the end by co-editor Robert C. Davis.

Each essay uses the analytical tool of gender to investigate its subject, ranging from questions of public/private, the creation of personal "honor," state-formation, and legal identity, to the economy, medical practices, sexuality, spirituality, religious reform, and finally, the Renaissance art scene itself. As a gender lens is applied to each of these now-standard historical categories, a remarkable transformation takes place by which the reader is able to see each category anew, without the traditional blinders created by old modes of thought. Readers inured to the standard historical line in any of these categories, even Renaissance specialists, will find the application of the perspective of gender truly amazing and heartening, for as one reads, a new image of this time period gradually emerges before the eye. One recognizes immediately a much more subtly-faceted society in nuances of color and vibrancy, in place of the flatter, more black, white, and gray of the past.

This new picture reads true, and it is certainly what Scott had in mind when she applied gender to the construction of class in her essay entitled "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," which appeared as

Chapter Three of her book. In this anthology here reviewed, no matter which chapter one turns to, the author squarely tackles the received wisdom on that issue and lays it flat! It's fascinating to watch. For example, in Chapter One, "The Geography of Gender in the Renaissance" by co-author Davis, the notion that public space was dominated exclusively by males (of all classes) in the fifteenth century is shown to be patently false. Taking the public piazzas of Venice as his case study, Davis shows not only how the well-known marginalized female prostitutes paraded and working-class market women moved freely in certain public spaces, but also how the upper-class "zentildonne," rendered taller than the men in their outrageous platform "zoccoli" with a bevy of handmaidens around them, publicly patrolled and dominated with their deliberate labored progresses (pp. 35-7). In Chapter Two, Sharon Strocchia similarly takes on a common assumption, that the job of maintaining one's "honor" was much more onerous for the Renaissance female than it was for the male (key concept here: a woman's virginity before marriage, then obedience after) and shows that it was a constant concern for BOTH sexes. The author gracefully elucidates each side to the question of the construction of Renaissance honor in her essay "Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities," also uncovering the difficulty for men to establish their honor (based on demonstrating virility) in the face of increasingly-civilized codes of social behavior, as has been suggested by Edward Muir (p. 59). No longer able to create their public masculine honor through unimpeded violence (drinking, gorging, and whoring for the lower classes, or rape/seduction and abandonment for the upper classes), Renaissance men were left looking for new avenues to establish their honorability as men. Strocchia clarifies for the reader that in Renaissance cities honor was a complex and maddeningly elusive state which had to be continually won or lost in public, where the stakes were always high.

Chapter Three by Stanley Chojnacki, entitled "Daughters and Oligarchs: Gender and the Early Renaissance State," describes the process by which the upper classes of both Venice and Florence gradually replaced private, family-based authority (what the author calls "ancient prominence" [p. 67]) with new public authority, based on the "official procedures" of the emerging state. This transference of power moved social dominance from the old feudal nobility to the new urban merchant elite. Like the previous two chapters, Chojnacki questions a basic tenet of Renaissance Studies, that is the unchallenged hegemony of patriarchal power. Here, he

shows how the new tension between traditional familial power and the newly-externalized power of government tended to challenge this hegemony, and, in fact, that communal governments were instrumental in defining the social position of women under their jurisdiction, in wide-ranging areas from issues of dowry and sumptuary management to the structure of convents and the welfare of orphans. He opens up the overly-simplistic notion of patriarchal control as emanating from the families of the Renaissance for better understanding. Likewise, Thomas Kuehn's Chapter Four, "Person and Gender in the Laws," shows how far the study of the complex society of the Renaissance has come.

In discussing the hot topic of the legal rights of women (many women would undoubtedly respond, "what legal rights?"), Kuehn makes the important initial point that all individual agency (female and male alike in the fifteenth century) was proscribed and channeled toward the perceived good of the collective family unit; individuals' rights being subordinated to the family group. Kuehn argues that society interwove families' interests in a way that each gender had a crucial role to play.

Having established this however, Kuehn also explains the genesis of the notorious Florentine institution of "mundualdus," or male guardian, which, uniquely to the commune of Florence, a woman needed to choose to represent her in legal matters in court. While male legal rights hinged on the notion of "pater potestas," informed by Roman law, female rights were tempered by the received belief of "infirmitas sexus." The author writes that this commonly-held belief in the physical and mental incapacity of the female sex rendered them unable to embrace "the organizing mechanism of society in law... [thereby depriving them] of institutional extensions of their singular personhood," quoting historian Yan Thomas (p. 104). This necessitated the irksome "mundualdus." And so, while not able to dissolve away all the legal lumps in the female gravy here, at least Kuehn has added some spice by stirring in more subtle understanding of the situation.

Into the economic realm with Chapter Five, entitled "Women and Work in Renaissance Italy," Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. begins by showing only the tip of the iceberg of the range of employment women actively pursued in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Activities named here vary widely from domestic servants, slaves, and prostitutes to teachers, copyists, purse and ribbon-makers in the convents; to carders, shearers, stretchers and skinners in the wool industry; and even to female matric-

ulation into the guild of doctors and spicemakers. In this study, which masterfully synthesizes the latest socioeconomic scholarship on women, the author cites David Herlihy's previous conclusion that these varied opportunities for female employment had begun to constrict at the end of the thirteenth century (p. 112). Cohn argues however, that demographic pressures after the Plague of 1348 would seem to contradict this decline. Further, citing P.J.P. Goldberg's findings on women in the economy of medieval York, in which Goldberg had identified three "micro-cycles" for female employment opportunities (labor markets up for women post-1348, up again between 1420-50 and down in the late 1400s), Cohn sees the same micro-cycles at work for the women in Florence (p. 125). This revises not only Herlihy's conclusions, but also Goldberg's, which had found Florence to be the "mirror opposite" of York. All in all, Cohn here paints a varied and complex picture of specific work-related issues in three different Renaissance towns: Verona, Florence and Pisa, by showing the subtle differences between these locales in terms of legal rights, types of work available, and numbers of female heads-of-households, over time. His scholarship eloquently cautions that any general pronouncements regarding the world of women and work must certainly wait on future archival research "across Italian cities," undertaken with care (p. 126).

Katherine Park's Chapter Six, "Medicine and Magic: the Healing Arts," is wonderfully typical of this collection of Renaissance scholarship, in that it takes a set of prevailing "urban myths" about the period, and untangles them with seemingly effortless expertise. In this chapter, a wide range of received notions are shown to be false in the realm of medicine, such as the idea that women practitioners only treated other women; that no women were "doctors" per se (only midwives or herbalists); that male practitioners never used charms, incantations, or "magical" remedies; and that women were never medical guildsmen, to name only a few. As it turns out, all these statements are false. Park uncovers the many approaches to healing and medicine available to people throughout various levels of Renaissance society. They in some ways had more options open than do we today and were likely to use a mixture of physical, magical and spiritual medicine to do the job, even employing aspects of the female and male body to effect a cure, especially in the realm of sexual medicine concerned with contraception, impotence, infertility and even unfaithfulness.

From female "empirics" and university-trained physicians, to practices in the north compared with southern medical traditions, this essay shows the wide range of

medicine practiced in the Renaissance by its female and male practitioners and the eventual increased demand for the "professionalization" of the craft, which resulted in newly-marginalized practitioners accused of being false doctors ("medicastro"), or even witches (p. 143). If this chapter teaches us one thing, it is to expect specificity of future scholarship and to eschew facile over generalization.

From medicine to gender and sexuality in Chapter Seven, Michael Rocke takes up the very malleable nature of gender identity in the Renaissance in his essay entitled "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy." Here, Rocke discusses the underlying notions about sexual difference which informed societal behavior for both men and women, how these notions shaped communal law and court proceedings, and finally, how "unauthorized" and deviant sexual behavior was both viewed and policed in the Renaissance state. The author's sources come from not only Florence and Venice, but Siena, Ferrara, and Pescia as well. He structures this fascinating chapter around the idea that both sexes lived within a socially-constructed framework called gender and that, especially in Renaissance urban space, EACH sex was severely constrained by that construction in many ways. For example, since the female sex was considered to be sexually voracious by nature, female sexuality had to be rigorously policed, especially in the upper classes, where transmission of property figured into the equation. By way of contrast, "maleness" was construed to be synonymous with "dominance," and therefore any hint of passivity was seen as an improperly "female" display. It is no accident that the only grounds for the annulment of a marriage was a man's failure to achieve an erection. Even socially-determined deviant behavior between two consenting males was a transgression solely for the passive partner. As long as a male was able to display dominance, even if he were a sodomite, he was being what Renaissance society considered "male." On the other hand, a male caught "in flagrante" in the passive role was banished from public sight for life into a home for the insane ("la pazzaria") (p. 169). In this essay, Rocke succeeds in opening up for study the very basis of gender as a category and becomes, in this way, the very center of what this book does so well.

The last three chapters take up more spiritual, but no less interesting, concerns. Daniel Bornstein's "Spiritual Kinship and Domestic Devotions," Chapter Eight, begins with an acknowledgment of the tension extant in Renaissance society between the ideal of celibacy and the need to reproduce the species. Here once more, we wit-

ness the fall of what are often characterized as mutually-exclusive categories of being—as in, “In the Renaissance, women had two choices: to marry or become a nun.” Citing the proscriptive literature written by Churchmen and women for the instruction of their faithful followers of both sexes, Bornstein fluidly shows us that these two states were anything but impermeable. For example, while the heroically-ascetic mystic Saint Catherine of Siena is shown to have written extremely vivid prose about Jesus to her confessor, Raymond of Capua, which Bornstein memorably characterizes here as full of “blood-soaked imagery and delirious eroticism” (p. 179), the lay-woman Bartolomea degli Obizzi, wife of an exiled Florentine man and mother of four, wrote detailed theological letters of purely spiritual guidance to the Dominican convent of Santa Lucia in Florence. These unexpected letters were found in twenty-seven foli at the end of a collection of the famous Giovanni Dominici’s writings for women.

Where then, did the secular end and the spiritual take hold? Bornstein demonstrates that neither sphere existed independently, and that even women in supposedly cloistered convents had continuing contact with their natal families, and even their own grown children. He shows that each world lived in a tenuous relationship with the other, balancing power and need in an on-going tightrope of self-definition.

Staying with the theme of spirituality, the author of Chapter Nine, Gabriella Zarri, renders the complexity of the issue of the Post-Tridentine reform of the convents in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century. In this chapter, “Gender, Religious Institutions and Social discipline: The Reform of the Regulars,” she describes how the dicta of the Council of Trent during the Catholic Reformation irreparably changed the lives of both nuns and monks within Italian monasteries. In this very interesting study, she is able to show the interplay between secular and spiritual concerns among the ruling elite of Church and commune. While reform was necessary, the new paradigms developed at Trent emphasized differences for each gender which served the interests of patriarchy. While monks were encouraged to become “soldiers for God,” following the military model introduced by the newly-organized Jesuits, nuns were to surrender as tightly-cloistered virginal “brides of Christ” (pp. 205, 212). The only new order which was eventually allowed some (restricted) freedom to come and go was the Ursuline order, founded by Angela Merici. But in general, civil and Church control of the female religious houses became a reality, while male houses developed a new missionary approach to spirituality which necessitated a

freer outreach into the community.

The many ways in which this played out in the everyday policy and practices of the Church gives lie to overly-simplistic statements about the effects of Trent on the Catholic Church and its most faithful. This essay demonstrates the conflict many high Churchmen at Trent experienced in wanting to reform religious practices (such as the warehousing of “excess” female kin), while at the same time, needing to recognize real social problems caused by prevailing marriage practices and concerns.

And finally, we are introduced to Karen-Edis Barzman’s Chapter Ten, “Gender, Religious Representation and Cultural Production in Early Modern Italy,” which is, in many ways, the most theoretical essay in this collection. The author’s objective here is to examine the interplay between the created Renaissance art object and the use to which that object was put by Renaissance women. Taking off from Linda Nochlin’s question, “Why have there been no great women artists?,” (which is by now almost as famous as the Joan Kelly statement with which I began this review), Barzman pulls apart the language in which Renaissance art production has been traditionally discussed, the gendered way in which art production has been defined, and the way in which some Renaissance women became art objects themselves, by appropriating art into a kind of personal spectacle or performance piece. [5]

She gives the example of one Caterina de’ Pazzi, who, after having entered a Carmelite convent in Florence in 1583 and taking the new name of Maria Maddalena, began interacting with various devotional art objects within the convent (a baby Jesus doll, detachable pieces off the cross) while in a mystical ecstasy, thus re-creating their meaning in relationship to herself and staging what was essentially an on-going performance over time. These episodes often lasted for hours, and frequently other nuns would be inspired to join in. To Barzman, Pazzi herself became an artistic creation. In this very imaginative essay, the author challenges future scholars of Renaissance art history to rethink old categories of “art,” “viewer,” and “cultural production,” to name a few of the traditionally-conceived terms associated with the very rarefied world from which women were all but excluded by definition. In so doing, a redefinition of what it meant to be an artist in the Renaissance may just emerge.

In conclusion, in spite of a few personal minute disagreements, and/or questions of terms, I highly recom-

mend this new anthology of gender issues in Renaissance Italy. You could not find a better overview of the latest and best scholarship in this field, and I guarantee that you'll be rewarded for your reading efforts. If, like me, you are fortunate enough to be teaching in this area, get this book. It will make you a better instructor, and you'll feel privileged to be in such a vibrant area of historical research.

Notes

[1]. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[2]. For example, David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Richard C.

Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1980), (to name a few).

[3]. Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?," in Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), pp. 175-201.

[4]. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (London, 1990; orig. 1860), p. 98.

[5]. Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?," *Art News* (special issue entitled "Women's Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History" (1971): 22-39.

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