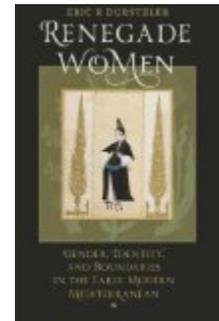


Eric Dursteler. *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. xiv + 222 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-0071-6; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4214-0072-3.

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Gender Tales in a Transreligious Mediterranean Context

Eric Dursteler's well-crafted book presents a handful of case studies of renegade women, or "individuals who rebelled against their faith," in the post-Battle of Lepanto eastern Mediterranean (p. ix). These renegades, women, families, children, heads of households, and well-to-do individuals, were not coerced into converting to a new faith. Most women who embraced a new faith were driven by hopes for greater social mobility and financial gain, as well as by the need to escape social, political, or economic difficulties in their homelands. According to the author, "reformulating their identities, embracing new faiths and new rulers, navigating institutions of power, and transgressing and manipulating the regions' intertwined geographical, political, and cultural boundaries, these women on the margin exerted 'shaping power' over their own lives" (p. 118).

Dursteler's greatest contribution rests with his capacity to display the agency of Mediterranean women, both children and adults. Women maneuvered "political and religious borders between the Venetian and Ottoman empires" (p. 111). The author proves that religious frontiers were porous, yet at the same time that states took a keen interest in the spiritual health of their subjects. In these tales of real life, the interesting tension is that women were imperial agents, while the Ottoman and Venetian governments actively intervened to protect their faith. The issue central to all stories is that of marriage. Because of the will to break away, to annul a marriage, to take vows, or to flee from a husband, each woman's

choice to turn her back on her partner's faith underscores how individual stories could wind up in diplomatic conflicts. Nevertheless, through the tribulations of renegade women, Dursteler ably shows how common and easy it was to convert and find a hospitable country. While doing so, his main argument is that religious conversion was mainly driven by economic adversity, not by spiritual calling. These women's stories inspire the reader to appreciate the fluidity of some Mediterranean regions, such as Croatia and the Greek islands, considered liminal spaces, or at the very least contested spaces where subjects could hold any faith.

Who were these daring renegade women? Dursteler selected five women. However, as he highlights in the conclusion, their fate was by no means exceptional, but rather ordinary. The "early modern female border crosser" was a common life episode along the shores of the Mediterranean (p. 118). Fatima Hatun (born Beatrice Michiel) was captured by corsairs while traveling in the Adriatic. While her brother Gazanfer Aga was sold into slavery, she returned to Venice. After she was left a widow with two children, the two siblings came into contact again, because, according to the author, Gazanfer, who had by then gained notoriety, hoped to strengthen his ties with the Ottoman elite. Bored in her second marriage, Beatrice left for Istanbul and converted to Islam. Dursteler explains that this conversion enabled her to gain control of her life. Similarly, Elena Civallesi was not a renegade but fled her renegade parents. Venice

withstood Ottoman opposition to have her marry into a Muslim family and supported her choice to take vows in a Venetian convent. Likewise, Caterina Satorovic escaped an arranged marriage. Through meticulous readings of archival records, Dursteler adroitly shows that the Venetian state intervened based on moral and religious grounds. Finally, Maria Gozzadini and her three daughters fled from Milos on a Venetian galley. The Venetian state once again intervened to help Maria and her family revert to Christianity. Though renegades were common, interreligious marriages were not without tensions. Throughout these stories, the themes of ideology, spiritual peril, and honor in border crossing become apparent, because, as the author puts it, these were the elements of the “shared rhythms of the Mediterranean” (p. 116).

Through the unfolding of extraordinary lives, Dursteler depicts the wider reality of the early modern Mediterranean. While *Renegade Women* is a work of microhistory at its best, Dursteler teases out larger historical significance. If read in conjunction with Natalie Zemon Davis’s *Trickster’s Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (2006), this book offers a wonderful array of individual Mediterranean stories. At the same time, these chronicles are not mere case studies, thanks to the ample historical context that Dursteler weaves in while developing each story. Because these accounts are set in the context of the Muslim-Christian struggle over the premodern Mediterranean, they exem-

plify what Mediterranean scholars seek to accomplish, that is, rendering histories “of” rather than histories “in” the Mediterranean.

While the archival research is impressive, most primary sources are in Italian and Croatian. The author has searched every European manuscript on the subject, but had he ventured into Ottoman sources, he might have been able to avoid conjectures. He mentions several times that “that person disappears from history,” but perhaps only from Italian history: the Ottoman side might have offered valuable evidence and provided a full story on the fate of these individuals. Moreover, rather than defining these stories as case studies, he could possibly have filled in details of the picture in a way that produced a more thesis-driven manuscript had he examined Ottoman sources. On a similar note, rather than a preface, a real introduction would have enabled him to contextualize better the lives of these renegade women within their Mediterranean context, an organizational gesture that would have assisted nonspecialists.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Dursteler’s style is always witty and intriguing. His prose is engaging and his analysis elegant. He is one of the few ethnographic historians of the early modern Mediterranean. I highly recommend this fascinating book to anyone interested not only in gender and women’s history, Mediterranean studies, or Ottoman and Italian history, but also in migration and identity, or religious history.

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