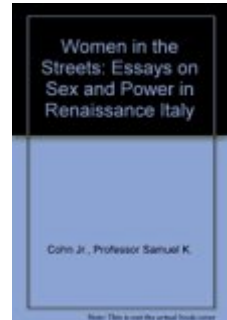


Samuel K. Cohn, Jr.. *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xi + 250 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5308-1.



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This impressive collection, organized into seven essays on women in Renaissance Italy by one of the most prolific American historians working in the field, provides specialists with a plethora of new demographic data on the vicissitudes of the female experience in the late fourteenth through sixteenth centuries in Italy. The statistics upon which this book's conclusions rest have been painstakingly culled from the archival records of six northern Italian communes: Arezzo, Assisi, Florence, Perugia, Pisa and Siena.

Cohn's book, however, does have a misleading title, taken from his first essay here, and readers should not be led to believe that this book will demonstrate female agency in Renaissance Italy. Instead, this demographic data predictably charts the radical diminution of women's rights over time. The unsurprising conclusion of all but one of these essays is that women in and around the northern Italian communes between the late 1300s and the mid 1500s, lost considerable voice in the public records. But the devil, as usual, is in the details. As Cohn writes on p. 20, "these records chronicle the deterioration of women's status and

power....", which he ties ultimately to the "...development of the Renaissance state during the fifteenth century." (p. 21) What is lacking here then, is a fundamentally new conclusion; what Cohn plummets the reader into that *is* new, are masses of bleak statistics of legal constriction.

In the Introductory chapter "The Social History of Women in the Renaissance," the author tips his hand by stating that the book will explore "the darker side of the Renaissance..." (p. 1) In offering a broad overview on the state of studies on Renaissance women, he certainly does begin at the beginning here, with reference to Jacob Burckhardt's infamous statement regarding female equality in the Renaissance, as well as Joan Kelly's by-now well-known feminist response. Cohn thoroughly works his way through the various and sometimes tortuous paths that historical investigations on Renaissance women have taken, from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. He, makes a strong case here, however, for a resolute focus on illuminating the laboring classes.

The first two essays concentrate on the city of Florence, which Cohn labels as "one of the worst

places to have been born a woman in the Italian Renaissance." (p. 15) While overtly suspicious of the anecdotal nature of microhistory, his first essay, "Women in the Streets, Women in the Courts, in Early Renaissance Florence," does begin with just such an account, from 1375, of a mouthy artisan-class Fiorentina named Filippa, who successfully challenges one Piero di Cianchino in court over an alleged public slander. But the author promises not to leave anecdote "speak for itself in microhistorical fashion." (p. 3) Instead, after a painstaking explanation of the fragmentation of juridical authority and responsibility over criminal activity in Florence throughout the fifteenth century, and an exhaustive statistical analysis of hundreds of documents, Cohn can confidently conclude that women became less visible as active participants in the public life of Florence.

But one could also point to Brucker's Lusanna in 1455 as an instance where, even well into the Quattrocento, there were woman like Filippa who did still actively challenge "the system," when seriously provoked.[1] Specific instances aside however, Cohn's findings overwhelmingly suggest a general trend of enveloping patriarchy, which eventually silenced the feminine voice in Florentine tribunals. The second essay, titled simply "Last Wills," comes to a similar conclusion. Here, Cohn has compared late-Trecento and early-Quattrocento last wills and testaments from Florence with wills from five other towns: Arezzo, Perugia, Siena, Assisi, and Pisa. His findings show that in Florence, and to a lesser degree, Arezzo and Perugia, women fared badly in terms of the disposition of property, which was firmly under the control of the patriarchal lineages into which they had married. Where mendicant ideals and preaching HAD changed testamentary practices however (in the towns of Siena, Assisi, and Pisa), he found that women's power over property was stronger.

With the third essay, "Women and the Counter Reformation in Siena," Cohn moves in space and time; geographically southwest from

Florence to Siena, and temporally ahead from the late medieval period to the era of the Counter Reformation. Here, he strikes down an historical given, namely that female agency was universally reigned in, in the stricter atmosphere of Post-Trientine Italy. Again, from a study of last wills and testaments, the author finds instead that the women of Siena at least, had transformed their own patterns of pious giving. They ceased being "simple cogs in the transmission of property down male family lineages, and instead, could dispose of their patrimonies more fully and freely..." (p.75) He calls for a reassessment of what he terms the "supposed analogous developments" of the age of authoritarianism ushered in by the Counter Reformation, and a more sensitive reading of what he sees as a more multifaceted era (p.74).[2]

In essay number four, entitled "Nuns and Dowry Funds" and arguably his most complex, Cohn stays with last wills and testaments, but again shifts time and space, this time moving backward to 1362-63, after the first return of the Black Death of 1348. He widens his scope from Siena to include the five other northern Italian towns noted above. This broad-scale study of hundreds of testaments to convents, aims to understand an early example of a shift in bequests, which after 1363, began to focus on earthly remembrance, and began dumping the influence of mendicant piety. Those who really suffer here are the small religious houses and independent religious women, for whom the records fall silent. The bequests which DO increase, are legacies to dower poor girls for marriage, which would ultimately work to the propagation of the cult of remembrance; remembrance of male ancestors. That women tended to cling to the medieval mendicant ideas longer than men, Cohn, citing Martines, attributes to the inclination of women to be more conservative and traditional (p. 42). Here, the author makes lavish use of charts and graphs to display his demographic data.

With essay five, "Sex and Violence on the Periphery," Sam Cohn moves into the contado of the Florentine state to examine the criminal court records of the *extrinseci*, which begin in 1398 and run throughout the fifteenth century. For this study, he promises to "mix narrative and quantitative methods, placing and testing the extraordinary within the context of the ordinary" (p. 99). This, I must say, came none too soon for this reader of his previous chapter and its exhaustingly complex use of statistical displays. Here, the author divides the territory into politically "hot" and "cold" zones, giving evidence that sexual deviance from social mores was more aggressively policed in "hot" areas, and given more leeway in the "cold".

And finally, the last essay, entitled "Prosperity in the Countryside: The Price Women Paid," ends this collection by living up to what author Cohn promised at the outset: that is, to document "the darker side of the Renaissance and, in particular, the decline in Italian women's status from the late fourteenth century until the Counter-Reformation..." (p.1) The author stays in the Florentine contado to explore the tax records from nineteen villages over roughly a 100-year time span (from 1365 to 1460), which show at what cost "prosperity" was bought. To deal with increased taxation, from 1402, some inhabitants simply fled, some participated in peasant uprisings, older women were forced to "out-migrate," and, ultimately desperate to limit family size and survive, many households practiced female infanticide. Cohn's sophisticated reading of the statistics suggests that from the early 1400's onward, an extremely skewed sex ratio is evident in tax records, peaking in 1427 at 100 female infants to 180 male, but still hovering at 100 female to 145 male as late as 1460. While property values rose and population was stabilized, the human cost was dear indeed.

One valuable habit of mind in Cohn's writing is his continual suggestions for new areas in which historical inquiry could be fruitfully fo-

cused. For example, in the last essay, his survey of suburban villages uncovers widely-disparate taxation rates for these villages, rates under which the inhabitants struggled. This discovery, the author states, throws into question the parameters of the traditional debate not only about communal tax policy, but also about the nature of the relationship between city and country itself. Another potential research project.

This book should inspire a new generation of feminist scholars to design studies which would engage the sobering findings reported here. I myself have only assigned this collection to students in my Italian Renaissance History classes along with Brucker's *Giovanni and Lusanna*, Brown's *Immodest Acts*, and Rosenthal's *The Honest Courtesan*, as a kind of counter.[3] When overwhelmed by masses of demographic data (even with the very occasional real-person narrative included), the process of feminine (and masculine) resistance to engulfing patriarchal strictures tends to be flattened and bottom-lined, losing the actual complexity of engagement. Even given Joan Scott's recent caution about a focus on individual incidents precluding the examination of societal structures, I believe that these specific individuals' experiences provide valuable information.[4] These experiences are important to learn, to teach, and to remember, because statistics can often make people merely deflated or angry, whereas a single individual's action can inspire.

Notes

[1]. Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna. Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

[2]. Such work is now taking place. For example, see Gabriella Zarri's "Gender, Religious Institutions and Social discipline: The Reform of the Regulars" in Brown and Davis, eds. *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, (London and New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 193-212, which gives us

a nuanced account of Post-Tridentine religious houses.

[3]. Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts. The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan. Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[4]. Joan Scott and Judith Butler, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political*, (New York: Routledge, 1992). An example of what I mean is Natalie Zemon Davis' *Women on the Margins*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), where she examines three seventeenth-century women's lives for the rich details of their specific situations.

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