

Sharon Strocchia. *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence*.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xvi + 261 pp. index. illus. tbls. bibl. \$50. ISBN: 978-0-8018-9292-9.

With this book Sharon Strocchia performs a service both to convent studies and to historians of Renaissance Florence by bringing these two fields together. The author makes a compelling case for nunneries' central role in the growth of the state up to the fall of the republic in 1530. In the two centuries after the Black Death, she argues, convents "were transformed from small, semiautonomous communities into large civic institutions serving family, state and society" (x). The case made here for the integration of convents into the economic, fiscal, and political objectives of the Florentine regime documents the same sort of civic-ecclesiastical connections established for other Italian cities, and will make the book required reading for historians of state and society in Florence.

In the century after the plague arrived, convents struggled to survive. Populations fell so quickly that some houses simply disappeared overnight

through death; others withered away as most women married. The period 1430–80 saw convents recover in size, begin to expand, and take on a more visible role in civic life; they became intertwined with Medicean state business, and began to be a means for elite families to patronize, make connections, and of course park unmarriageable daughters as dowries began to rise. Finally, after 1480 came a period of explosive growth, due largely to the changing marriage market, but also driven by religious movements and by the general sense of crisis during regime change and wars. Nearly a thousand women brought bedrolls and packed into the large convent of Le Murate for about a month in early 1530 (35). In the longer term, this period launched the most florid age of the convents as more and more patrician women took religious vows over the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. But the real golden age of convents lies beyond the scope of the book.

While intermittently highlighting one or another convent, the book mainly gives an overview of Florence's thirty-odd convents within the walls, and some twenty houses beyond the walls. The author relies on a wide variety of documentation, drawn particularly from the convents' papers and the city's public offices, to weave the nunneries' history into the civic fabric. In the Medicean period of the fifteenth century, families abandoned neighborhood strategies to locate daughters in convents all across the city; Strocchia links this to a general weakening of neighborhood ties and the building of a city-wide elite under Medici influence. Through their increasing investments in the *monte*, or public debt, convents became subject to "a coherent fiscal policy that drew convents into a broad network of fiscally dependent civic institutions operating under the umbrella of Medici patronage" (102), such as the convent of Le Murate. Chapters 3 and 4, on convent economies and nuns' work, are the high points of the book. Strocchia establishes the wide range of wealth among convents, but finds that even the richest, such as San Pier Maggiore, were chronically underendowed, relying heavily on entrance fees, private allowances, unpredictable gifts, and their own labor. Their poverty, relative to wealthier Venetian convents, corresponded to the weaker position of Florentine women in the family and in society more generally. Textile work, particularly in the silk industry, gave nuns a supplement to these meager provisions, and in return nuns formed part of "an invisible labor force constituted by women and children" (113) essential to the industry's profitability. The houses of San Gaggio, Santa Brigida del Paradiso, and Santa Maria di Monticello provide excellent detailed case studies. Gold thread became a convent specialty; manuscript illumination and educating girls provided smaller income supplements.

Strocchia focuses on political, social, and economic life, leaving aside some important themes that have animated recent convent studies. Readers will find little discussion of individual nuns, and virtually nothing of their religious life. Nor will they find indications of the many intercity connections among religious women of this or that order, like the links among Dominican convents across Tuscany noted recently by Ann Roberts or the female Savonarolan networks reconstructed by Tamar Herzig. But this highly local, secular, and civic focus does not detract from

the book's value. Convents, long a hazy presence on the rich scholarly map of Renaissance Florence, now have their political and economic contours there clearly charted.

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