

Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th Century).

Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, ed.

Visual Culture in Early Modernity. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014. xx + 294 pp. \$119.95.

The ten essays of this informative volume illuminate what its editor, Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, calls “the dark side of the coin” of Renaissance sexual and marital disorder: male, rather than female, sexual reputation. While the topics of cuckoldry and impotence may be “dark” in terms of the relative dearth of scholarly attention they have received, they are, in another sense, the light side of the coin. From comedies where old men gobble

down potency enhancers, to humorous drawings of husbands shopping for elegant horns, to the evident glee that Italian aristocrats took in gossip about their peers' sexual malfunctions, the material explored in this book opens a window not only onto the myriad of ways that male sexual reputation intersected with the political, social, and artistic concerns of the period, but also onto the complex functions of laughter as a mechanism of social regulation.

The first six essays are divided between two sections, "Defamed Buildings and Shamed Bodies" and "Impotence, Magic, and Medicine," a somewhat arbitrary division, given the centrality of impotence — and the "shamed bodies" that experienced it — to both. The one "defamed building" in question is Bianca Cappello's palace in sixteenth-century Florence: technically purchased by her husband but funded with the money of her lover, Francesco de' Medici, it was a target for often-scatological "house-scorning" practices of a kind that Jacqueline Musacchio documents as having been relatively common across the Italian Peninsula. The remaining essays turn primarily to impotence, in its political, medicinal, theatrical, occult, and even culinary ramifications. Molly Bourne relates the truly scandalous lengths to which Vincenzo Gonzaga, in 1584, was obliged to go in order to prove to his prospective Medici in-laws that he was capable of deflowering a virgin, an account that amply proves her claim that constructions of masculinity relied more on a man's "capacity to penetrate and ejaculate within a woman's body" than on his fertility (36). Matteo Dumni examines fifteenth-century beliefs in, and skepticism about, magically induced impotence, focusing on the young duke of Milan's difficulties in consummating his 1488 marriage to Isabella of Aragon — difficulties variously attributed to witchcraft, timidity, humoral imbalance, and the machinations of an uncle with designs on the bride. Laura Giannetti and Meredith K. Ray offer wonderfully detailed accounts of remedies to restore potency: Giannetti by way of comedies featuring "old fools in love" who have recourse to a host of aphrodisiac foods and concoctions, including the famous potion known as *satiriòn*; and Ray through "books of secrets," including a manuscript compiled by the fifteenth-century countess Caterina Sforza. If I were to quibble about anything in these essays, it would be that the richness of the primary material at times exceeds the amount of scholarly analysis: Ray, for instance (whom I don't wish to single out — there are other examples), minimizes the complexity of her own exploration of Sforza's recipes for simulating virginity when she concludes that *libri di segreti* "uphold social and sexual custom" in "promot[ing] stable, regulated sexual relationships that would ensure the female partner's fidelity and fertility" (135).

The last four essays of the volume form a cohesive group under the title "Horns and Visual Innuendo," exploring representations of the cuckold in visual art from Italy, France, Switzerland, and elsewhere. There is no shortage of analysis or argument in this section: Christiane Andersson meticulously contextualizes the enigmatic artwork of Niklaus Manuel and Urs Graf within the military history of early sixteenth-century Swiss mercenaries, explaining the "pervasive sense of vulnerability and opportunism" visible in these drawings of soldiers and sex workers resigned to shame; Francesca Alberti examines

paintings depicting Saint Joseph as God's cuckold to argue for an instructive use of laughter, through which the spectator was moved to understand the doctrine of incarnation and to emulate Joseph's acceptance of divine will. The lightheartedness of Baccio del Bianco's sketches of universal cuckoldry in 1630s Florence, as contextualized and interpreted by Louise Rice, contrasts with the grim satire of a set of mid-seventeenth-century French engravings of scenes of household disorder, on which Matthews-Grieco's contribution focuses. These final two essays, in a sense, exemplify the range of uses to which early modern Europeans put the figure of the cuckold, and the range of affects he could evoke, from Carnavalesque delight to the serious social commentary and political allegory that Matthews-Grieco discerns in her subject. While collections like this one are rarely read cover to cover, the time invested is well repaid: as a literary scholar mainly conversant with cuckoldry, impotence, and adultery in early modern England, I learned an enormous amount about these issues in other European cultures, while being entertained, fascinated, and (*grazie mille*, Vincenzo Gonzaga) sometimes even shocked.

JENNIFER PANEK, *University of Ottawa*