

Eric Dursteler. *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean*.

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What are renegade women? Renegade women were those who in the early modern Mediterranean “rebelled against the faith” (ix) and converted to Islam. Dursteler broadens this term to include all sorts of women who transgressed religious, gender, social, political, and geographic boundaries. While the historiography has

overwhelmingly focused on male renegades, Dursteler is concerned about the lives and experiences of renegade women living in the early modern Mediterranean. He recounts the tale of four women (and their daughters), converts, who according to the author represent the “exceptional normal” (117). They are arranged in three chapters that are followed by a conclusion that sums up the main arguments of the narrative chapters.

Dursteler begins his narrative with the tale of Beatrice Michiel of Venice. She abandoned her second Venetian husband, joined her brother in Constantinople, converted to Islam, and married an Ottoman official. This marriage gave her access to the imperial harem, the main center of Ottoman power. Hers is an excellent case to show that women from respected families could integrate into a new cultural setting in a foreign society. Beatrice/Fatima gained an amazing status of power and influence, a standing that she used as “leverage to benefit herself and the two sons she had left behind in Venice” (111). Here, Dursteler recounts a fascinating case; it would have made his narrative even stronger if he had speculated less about the motives of her conversion and had concentrated entirely on the question of how the conversion offered her new life options and hitherto unknown forms of female agency.

While Fatima’s unconventional life played out in the eastern Mediterranean’s two largest cities, the second short story of the Christian Elena Civadelli and the Muslim Mihale takes us to Dalmatia. Dalmatia was where the Ottoman and Venetian empires adjoined most directly. So close were the two that it was said that in Venetian Zara “you could hear the Turkish cock crow” (36). This physical vicinity played a pivotal role in the dramatic events of the young women’s lives. Dursteler argues for complexity and, as a cultural historian, for the porousness of the Veneto-Ottoman boundary. What does this mean for the lives of the young women mentioned above? Elena, whose mother and father had converted to Islam and who had attempted to kidnap Elena in order to reunite the family in Istanbul, was moved by the Council of Ten (the most powerful Venetian ruling body) from Zara to the Casa delle Zitelle in Venice, a refuge for women in danger of conversion. She never followed her family to Istanbul, but rather became a nun in a Venetian convent. In the case of Mihale, her parents, who were living in a Dalmatian city called Spalato, feared that their daughter might be kidnapped when she left home. But it was the girl herself who had abandoned her father’s house in order to become a Christian. With the protection of Venetian officials she was, like Elena Civaelli before her, taken to the Casa delle Zitelle in Venice. The attempts of her father to see his daughter were finally successful and treated with care by the Venetian officials, who were very aware that Mihale’s case could escalate in a diplomatic affair. Her case illuminates the emotional context of conversions and how very much they disrupted early modern family relationships.

The last tale is the fascinating story of the widow Maria who lived with her three children on Milos, a small island under Ottoman rule “situated at the western gateway to the Aegean” (76). Overwhelmingly, the population was orthodox, with a few Roman Catholics and even fewer Muslims. Maria had been married to

a Muslim — by coercion as she claimed. Her children, however, had been secretly baptized and raised by her in the Christian faith. For Dursteler this situation illustrates the confessional ambiguity of the early modern Mediterranean. However, one could argue differently and interpret the case as an example of a successful confessionalization, since Maria, once raised as a Christian, defended her Catholic identity and that of her children even in a religiously mixed marriage and never converted to the religion of her husband. The experience of religious diversity, it seems, involved the building of confessional identities. When a Venetian galleass stopped at Milos, Maria begged the captain to help her to escape from the island with her three children. Maria and her youngest daughter entered an important convent on Corfû, and the two remaining daughters married prestigiously. They could have lived happily ever after, but “the contest over their future was only beginning” (90). Involved were not only Venice and Istanbul; the case was even followed in Rome.

Dursteler has written a fine book for a wide audience, with narratives that are built on thorough archival research. The local histories are placed in a broader perspective and offer insights into a particular early modern Mediterranean culture in which gender, religion, and geography intersected. However, whether this proves that early modern boundaries of different sorts were in fact always and exclusively permeable, blurred, and fuzzy — as the author and other cultural historians claim — is in my view not entirely convincing. The tales equally illuminate a great awareness of the effort to maintain different boundaries — including the geographical borders that women transgressed, as the cases of Elena, Mihale, and Maria have shown — and could be interpreted, as I have suggested in the case of Maria, as evidence that religious diversity fostered, rather than blurred, confessional identities as a result of religious experience. Very convincing indeed, however, is the conception of the Mediterranean as a stage for interactions and coexistence between the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Rather than highlighting the cultural, social, and political differences of these two worlds by reconstructing the experiences of renegade women, the author reconstructs some of the cultural similarities that the Venetian-Ottoman empires shared. Herein lies the greatest merit of the book.

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