

Women's writing scholars and English drama historians will benefit from her study.

K. J. P. Lowe. *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvi + 437 pp. + 42 illus. \$90.00. Review by THOMAS WORCESTER, COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS.

Vernacular chronicles of three convents form the basis of this study: Santa Maria delle Vergini (Venice), known as Le Vergini; Santa Maria Annunziata (Florence), known as Le Murate; Santi Cosma e Damiano (Rome), known as San Cosimato. The chronicler of Le Vergini, a house of canonesses, was an anonymous member (or several anonymous members) of the community. The text was composed in 1523. Le Murate was Benedictine; Suora Giustina Niccolini produced its chronicle in 1598. San Cosimato was Franciscan; Suora Orsola Formicini composed a chronicle extant in three versions between 1603 and 1613. Lowe does an excellent job showing how each document is a far richer historical source than many scholars have supposed. In comparing and contrasting these chronicles of female religious life from three different contexts, she explores a broad array of questions about female agency, religious traditions and innovations in an age of reform, as well as social and economic life, the arts, and cultural production.

Lowe thoroughly explores both common features of three chronicles, as well as differences between them. Le Vergini restricted its membership to noble women, and their relatively high level of literacy and education is evident from the chronicle's form and content. Many of the noble canonesses could compose orations in Latin; these elite women brought their own private servants with them to the convent, a convent without restrictions of cloister or even anything like perpetual vows. But events in 1519 at Le Vergini had upset these traditional ways: the patriarch (bishop) of Venice took control of the convent, with the backing of the doge. Previously, Le Vergini had acknowledged only the pope as a religious superior, and popes generally left the canonesses to their own devices. The 1523 chronicle manifests the anger of the canonesses who now had to contend with close episcopal supervision as well as the introduction, by force, of a growing number of strictly obser-

vant, cloistered canonesses in their house. Thus anger and resentment on the part of the “traditional” members of Le Vergini pervades the chronicle in ways not found in the chronicles of Le Murate and San Cosimato. Yet all three narratives are conservative in that they promote the “ancient” privileges and traditions of their communities. They all contain foundation stories that glorify the community’s origins and history; they include tales of triumph over adversity that suggest likely survival and even prosperity for many more generations. The chroniclers carefully “construct” a past in order to justify and defend a certain vision of the present and future of their respective communities.

Florence’s Le Murate had survived more than one inundation by the Arno. It was also a convent that had strength in numbers. While Le Vergini typically had between 25 and 50 nuns, Le Murate at times reached 200. It was also a much more inclusive house with a membership by no means restricted to nobility. Music was highly valued in this convent; candidates for entrance were sometimes accepted without dowries if they had good voices. Visual arts were also honored; in 1546, Le Murate commissioned a *Last Supper* for its refectory from Giorgio Vasari. Le Murate was highly regarded by the Florentine elites as a suitable venue for the upbringing of their daughters. Young girls might be placed there, whether or not there was an expectation that they would eventually become nuns. Catherine de Medici spent some time at Le Murate as a child, and she remained a patron of the house long after, even as Queen of France. Suora Giustina Niccolini reports, for instance, that in 1581 Catherine ordered that a bas-relief portrait of herself be given to Le Murate. A fully observant house by the mid-1400s, Le Murate’s traditions were much more compatible with the reforming spirit of the sixteenth century than were the free-wheeling ways of Le Vergini.

San Cosimato was Franciscan; like Le Murate it was observant by the middle of the fifteenth century. It was a community of some 60 nuns; the male authorities to which it was subject were Franciscan friars. In general, Suora Orsola Formicini praises steps that were taken to keep the convent on the straight and narrow path of observance. But Formicini recounts in more negative terms a visitation of Roman religious houses ordered by the pope in the early 1590s and carried out by the bishop of Bergamo. Such external interference the nuns opposed, even though they were models of piety and observance. Friendly relations with San Cosimato were maintained by some

popes: Sixtus IV was a patron of the house.

Lowe does a good job of showing how all of the chroniclers highlighted prominent patrons of their communities. In the case of Le Vergini, links with an emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and a whole series of Venice's doges receive much attention as a way of validating and defending the importance and independence of the convent. For Le Murate, Catherine de Medici was by no means the only Medici to have supported the community. Not surprisingly, for Rome's San Cosimato papal patronage could be especially useful to have and to make known.

This study also does a fine job of showing how blind most (male) historians have been to the significance of women's narratives—such as the convent chronicles examined here. Lowe traces such blindness to the biases of nineteenth-century scholars who “imbibed and accepted the cultural norms of their time, which decreed that women were weak, foolish and unreliable” (52). It is thus ironic to see Lowe mimic nineteenth-century historians when she relentlessly scorns and condemns the “Counter Reformation” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whether or not the data from the convent chronicles supports such un-nuanced conclusions, Lowe portrays the nuns as victims of an evil Council of Trent and of clerical “abuse” of authority. The chronology of the chronicles in question corresponds poorly to such a picture. The reform program imposed on Le Vergini by the patriarch of Venice was instituted in 1519, long before Trent (1545–63), and it is precisely those events of 1519 and the years immediately following that form Lowe's strongest case for a “gloomy” (299) Counter Reformation. Study of early modern convents in Italy and elsewhere has become an exciting and prolific field of scholarship. This book makes a solid contribution to further growth of the field. Though some of its interpretive framework may not be altogether persuasive, the volume succeeds admirably in underscoring the importance of previously ignored sources.

Thomas Kranidas. *Milton and the Rhetoric of Zeal*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005. xvi + 255 pp. \$58.00. Review by JAMES EGAN, THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON.

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