

Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. — *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Pp. xi, 250.

This book is a collection of seven essays, three of which (chapters 2, 3, and 4) have been previously published. The other four represent new work, starting with the first essay, entitled “The Social History of Women in the Renaissance”. In this short historiographic chapter Samuel K. Cohn reviews the social history of women in Renaissance Florence and presents his anti-Burckhardtian thesis. In essence, Cohn dismisses Jacob Burckhardt and others who depict Renaissance Italy as a golden age for women. This optimistic view of the Renaissance, says Cohn, has been perpetuated with the focus on elite women and their letters and diaries — records that show little about the dark side of this period. Using criminal court records, the author delves into this dark side of society and concludes that Florence “may well have been one of the worst places to have been born a woman in the Italian Renaissance” (p. 15).

By analysing court cases from Florence, c.1350–c.1450, Cohn argues in his second essay, “Women in the Streets, Women in the Courts, in Early Renaissance Florence”, that women’s status and power deteriorated over the course of the Renaissance, both in the courts and in the streets where women defended their interests. Cohn looks at two samples of court cases, one from the years 1343 to 1378, a period he admits was fraught with insurrection, and another from the years 1455 to 1466, a period of “relative social calm” (pp. 20–21). His analysis is complicated by the fact that he employs different types of documentation for the two periods. The first sample comes from the medieval tribunals, the *podestá* and the *capitano del popolo*, but changes in Florence’s system of criminal justice show that, whereas these medieval tribunals dealt with an average of 1,500 cases annually before the Black Death, that number dropped to about 100 per year during the second period under study. Depopulation was also an important factor because Florence’s population was then less than half of what it had been prior to the Black Death. Furthermore, the two courts noted above were abolished in 1502, while a new court was established in 1378, the *otto di guardia*. Not only were the *otto*

records kept differently (fewer names were provided), but “only three slim volumes” survived for the period under study (p. 21). Despite these problems, Cohn concludes that women dropped in status because the number of women appearing in the tribunals, as plaintiffs or defendants — but especially as defendants — declined dramatically; thus, in his opinion, women lost their ability to redress grievances in the streets of late medieval Florence. It is not clear, however, how the absence of women in these court records, incomplete as they are, means that women were kept off the streets as well.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with a different set of documents, wills and testaments from Renaissance Florence and its territories. The first two of these essays, “Last Wills: Family, Women, and the Black Death in Central Italy” and “Women and the Counter Reformation in Siena: Authority and Property in the Family”, are, by Cohn’s own admission (p. xi), essentially unaltered parts of his earlier published work. Chapter 3 provides a comparative analysis of women’s inheritance rights in six Italian city-states (Arezzo, Florence, Pisa, Siena, Perugia, and Assisi). The common link between these regions was that, overall, both merchants and commoners were obsessed with the transfer of property through the male line, with mothers and fathers leaving their property to their sons; daughters received dowries. Strict observance of male lineage was more pronounced in Florence, however, where fewer married women left wills of their own and husbands’ settlements were more restrictive for their respective widows. A Florentine woman was often left the usufruct rights to her husband’s estate, but only if she remained chaste, did not remarry, and gave up her dowry. Insofar as property rights were concerned, “Florence was the worst place to have been born a woman” (p. 55).

The family’s obsession with lineage through the male line and the inherent preoccupation with the perpetuation of earthly goods were vigorously attacked by Tridentine reforms, which attempted to replace that culture with a renewed ideal of a spiritual life achieved through ascetic deeds. Consequently but unintentionally, says Cohn, the Counter Reformation was good for women. First, women enjoyed greater participation in religious ceremonies at the local level, a phenomenon that he suggests developed in Siena soon after the first apostolic visit in 1575–1576. Secondly, husbands purportedly moved by Tridentine religious zeal began by the second half of the *Seicento* to leave their wives as universal heirs, with ultimate rights to control the descent of property and with fewer restrictions on the widows’ behaviour.

One of the consequences of this transition to a more “companionate” marriage (p. 65) is that noble women began to divide their property equally among their daughters and sons, some showing preference for nieces over nephews, and one even stipulating that males could inherit only in the absence of female children. Many questions remain about the prevalence of these pro-female bequests, but Cohn’s fifth essay, “Nuns and Dowry Funds: Women’s Choices in the Renaissance-”, adds an interesting dimension to gender analysis of testators from the pestilent year of 1362–1363. Cohn deliberately avoids the obvious as he attempts to explain why women continuously left more money to nuns and nunneries, whereas men preferred to establish dowry funds. Maybe women yearned for more than “to endure

the secular world through marriage” (p. 94). The reader will certainly find these apparent gender differences enticing, but any definitive conclusions are problematic because, as Cohn readily admits, only about one-third of women’s wills have survived in comparison to men’s wills.

The most problematic essay in this collection, however, is found in chapter 6, “Sex and Violence on the Periphery: The Territorial State in Early Renaissance Florence”. Using vicariate court documents from the years 1398 to 1434, Cohn focuses on moral and political crimes in the Florentine countryside. At the outset, Cohn notes that “notaries relished presenting infanticide cases in gruesome detail” (p. 101), but so does he. Although he found but eight cases of infanticide in nearly 8,000 court cases he examined, and sex crimes never amounted to more than 5 per cent of the annual caseload, the author presents a litany of sensational details that smacks of voyeurism. More disturbing, however, is Cohn’s distorted viewpoint as he attempts to illustrate the oppressive nature of the Florentine state and its violent expression in combatting violent acts, moral or political. Significantly, Cohn divides this essay into two parts, sex crimes and violent crimes (political revolts). That Cohn did not equate rape with violence is obvious in his recounting of “the remarkable sexual career” of a 16-year-old boy who, in the course of six years, “seduced” (not raped) a number of girls, ages three to five. Since the young man also allegedly had had sexual relations with a number of married women, Cohn suggests that “perhaps they were the mothers of the seduced little noble girls, who permitted him such open space in their courtyards and a free hand with their daughters”. When in doubt, blame the mother. Furthermore, says the author, this boy’s “sexual exploits” were actually akin to “romances” and yet, “despite his tender age and that his mode of conquest was with flattery and flowers”, the Florentine vicariate courts failed to see “the boy’s sexual adventures as the peccadillos of an age of innocence” (pp. 104–105). Boys will be boys, but in this case officials had the boy whipped, castrated, and imprisoned for life, and forced him to provide a dowry payment to his last victim. Therein lies the real tragedy, according to Cohn’s interpretation. He later refers to this young man as a “Don Giovanni” (p. 119).

Lest the reader miss the point, Cohn reiterates that “nor do these country and small-town girls always seem so simple and naive, as the court notaries often alleged” (p. 120). For instance, he mentions a case in which a man sodomized a nine-year-old girl who, according to the man, was at his doorstep and had agreed to the act, for pay. As proof of the little girl’s complicity, Cohn cites Elizabeth Cohen out of context, asserting that her work on early-modern Rome shows that “‘chatting at doorways and gates was often a prelude to a love affair’ ” (p. 120, n. 104). Seen in this light, Cohn’s concerns about the “oppressive nature of these arrests for alleged sexual transgressions” (p. 130) can certainly be understood.

After this warped analysis, it is almost refreshing to read the final essay, “Prosperity in the Countryside: The Price Women Paid”, in which Cohn attempts to explain the reasons for different rates of economic recovery between regions in the Florentine *contado*. Although he might be accused of using negative if not circumstantial evidence, Cohn concludes that, by the mid-fifteenth century, peasants

living in the mountainside enjoyed greater economic prosperity because they practised a form of population control that included female infanticide and out-migration of older, widowed women to work in towns and villages. Proof for this thesis lies in the incongruous ratio of males to females noted in tax registries of the period, with 188 males to 100 females recorded in 1427, a trend that continued throughout the century.

The book ends rather abruptly with this last essay. A concluding chapter bringing all the arguments together would have been helpful. Most importantly, the author would do well to re-examine his approach to gender analysis in historical research.

Darlene Abreu-Ferreira
University of Winnipeg

Daniel Hickey — *Local Hospitals in Ancien Régime France: Rationalization, Resistance, Renewal, 1530–1789*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997. Pp. xi, 275.

What happened to the thousands of small, local institutions of poor relief, remnants of the charitable establishments of medieval France that had for centuries ministered to the needs of the poor, when the royal government and the larger towns of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries undertook, for their own not disinterested reasons, to centralize and rationalize poor relief? Earlier studies of the hospitals of early modern France either ignore this particular question or accept the argument, largely derived from the work of Michel Foucault, that in the seventeenth century the small hospitals of provincial France were systematically despoiled of their property and closed down, to be replaced with urban centres which were the direct beneficiaries of the new developments. These reinvigorated, enlarged institutions applied the policies of the great confinement on a grand scale, transforming France's hospitals into an urban-based system of *hôpitaux-généraux* (workhouses, prisons, and even foundling homes) for the able-bodied poor and *hôpitals-Dieu* (infirmaries) for the sick, an arrangement which would prevail into the second half of the eighteenth century. Then, still according to extant studies, a succession of comptrollers-general would again entrust impoverished local authorities with responsibility for caring for the sick poor, encouraging those authorities to embrace modernity by developing such punitive institutions as *dépôts de mendicité* for the able-bodied poor.

This, Daniel Hickey explains, is not quite what happened. True, small communities experienced population stagnation and the loss of structures to support local institutions, at the same time as the royal government began to promulgate legislation promoting the centralization and rationalization of poor relief. Specifically, the royal government sought support for old soldiers, and the growing urban hospitals began to look for additional revenues from among the fixed assets of local hospitals when the latter were in a weakened state. The attack was real enough and, in time, literally thousands of local institutions went under. Even so, the new royal