The editors have chosen to present these thought-provoking essays with only a minimal introduction, no doubt in order to provide their authors ample page space. However, a brief survey of the growing corpus of historiography and theory on the body might have been appropriate here, although the essays and accompanying footnotes of Schmidt and Horodowich correct this lacuna to some degree. Despite the failure to situate their volume in the context of what might be called “body studies,” this fine work stands as evidence of the benefits of interdisciplinarity. *The Body in Early Modern Italy* issues a call to all disciplines, especially historians, who, as Horodowich notes, lag behind literary and visual scholars in their attention to the body. This observation is confirmed by the contribution of only one historian in the present volume. Scholars across the humanities need to engage in further explorations of the body as metaphor, in motion, and as a canvas on which the multiple discourses of masculinity and femininity were written and rewritten.

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


In this lucidly written and meticulously organized study, Sharon T. Strocchia examines the role played by female monasticism in broader social, economic, and political developments taking place in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Florence. Her goal is nothing less than to place the burgeoning field of convent studies in conversation with the equally vibrant, yet heretofore largely independent, body of research on the social history of Renaissance Florence. She succeeds admirably in this effort: students of every aspect of social, political, and cultural life in Renaissance Florence will find elements of this study to be of direct relevance to their work; similarly, specialists in convent studies will welcome the delicate interweaving of topics central to that field (community relations, interactions with the Church, the politics of enclosure) with “the grand narrative of early modern Europe” (ix).
Strocchia seeks to situate convents as key players in developments that, while long-established in the scholarship on Renaissance Florence, have not before been associated with female monasticism: early modern state-building, shifts from neighborhood to city, the aristocratization of the Church, the rise of the silk industry, to name a few. While scholarship on relationships between nuns and the institutional Church has focused primarily on the post-Tridentine era, Strocchia sets her sights earlier, on the long fifteenth century (roughly 1348 to 1530), which she argues persuasively was a time of massive transformations in the nature of female monasticism in Florence. Building upon the recent work of Silvia Evangelisti, Jutta Sperling, and P. Renée Baernstein, Strocchia demonstrates that many of the changes in Florentine convent life associated with Tridentine reforms were in the works decades earlier, with Trent serving as a formal confirmation of processes already well underway.

Although she incorporates the findings of a handful of scholars on convent life in other Italian (and European) cities as comparative evidence, Strocchia’s focus is unequivocally Florentine. She begins by charting the growth of female monasticism in Florence over the course of the fifteenth century, finding that “the mid-fifteenth century was a watershed that witnessed not only the erosion of local neighborhood associations but also a sea change in the function of convents as social institutions” (71). While fourteenth-century convents were characterized by small size, semi-autonomous nature, and neighborhood scope, nunneries in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, she evinces, were often large, complex institutions with economic, political, and legal ties to a wide range of external forces that stretched across the city and beyond.

Strocchia draws from the archives of a number of convents — large and small, elite and humble — located both within Florence and outside its walls. She traces shifts in patterns of monastic recruitment and convent asset portfolios by examining tax returns, inventories, contracts, and internal convent records. In order to assess the financial health of various convent endowments, she also looks at monte (communal fund) payments, letters, and petitions. In addition to more expected sources, such as ecclesiastical visitation records, her examination of convent enclosure makes substantial use of the archives of the Office of the Night, better known to
students of Florentine history for its role as the policers of sodomy. The chapter focusing on convent labor is perhaps the most fascinating in the book; Strocchia demonstrates that work was a central feature of the lives of most Florentine nuns and that convents were remarkably adroit players in the Florentine market economy. Case studies — gold thread production at San Gaggio, embroidery at the Paradiso, the shift to lace making in the sixteenth century at S. Maria a Monticelli — provide much of the rich detail.

The book is remarkable for both its richness and its clarity: the chapters are logically framed, the sections of broad argumentation are supported by vivid case studies, and the conclusions are both sound and thought-provoking. Although she positions herself as an historian, Strocchia is conscious of an interdisciplinary audience and takes every opportunity to point out intersections between her findings and the interests of scholars of religion, gender, art, economics, demography, and so on. Students of early modern women will find much of interest in this book; the chapters on convent labor and enclosure in particular are replete with fascinating details, the fruit of Strocchia’s careful and painstaking archival work. Economic historians will be particularly interested in the chapters on convent patrimonies and labor. Historians of visual and material culture will find the sections on the manufacture of gold thread and embroidered liturgical vestments essential reading. Specialists on the Florentine church will welcome the new perspective Strocchia offers on the relationship between ecclesiastical officials and the institutions under their jurisdiction.

Strocchia is especially attentive to the contradictions and tensions that characterized the position of nuns within the urban environment. Voluntary poverty, so essential to the spiritual mission of monastics, worked better in theory than in practice where nuns were concerned. While convents could be sites of notable female agency, they were also environments supervised by and dependent upon patriarchal authorities. Although “private wealth” ostensibly had no place in the convent, Strocchia shows that various forms of independent monies (entitlements, allowances, wages, bequests) played a critical (if controversial) role in convent life. As labor became increasingly essential to the financial viability of the
Florentine convent, the involvement of nuns in the economic life of the city resulted in potentially problematic contacts with the outside world.

Though arguably beyond the scope of her inquiry, further comparison with other types of residential institutions, particularly hospitals and friaries, would have strengthened Strocchia’s already convincing arguments about the pivotal role played by the convent in broader historical developments. This reader was struck by a number of parallels between convents and the city foundling hospital, the Innocenti. Both female monasticism and child abandonment were caught up in pro-natalist discourses in the early fifteenth century. The Innocenti also assumed an active role in the silk industry, both as the charitable project of the Silk Guild and as a production center. “Holy innocents,” like “sacred virgins,” were seen as potent intercessors for the city. While Strocchia does contrast labor practices at convents with those at custodial institutions in the Cinquecento, it might have been rewarding to compare “the constitutive role that nuns and nunneries played in forming the Florentine state and in realigning church-state relations” (192) with that of such a closely related (but fundamentally dissimilar) institutional type.

Strocchia’s study makes a significant contribution to the study of Renaissance Florence. By weaving the convent into myriad aspects of Florentine social and political life, she offers both thought-provoking findings and a trove of new evidence that will make the book required reading for a wide range of scholars.

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This collection of essays by Patricia Hochschild Labalme (1927–2002) on aspects of Renaissance Venetian culture, published posthumously and edited by Benjamin G. Kohl for the Variorum Collected Studies Series, pays tribute to the author’s deeply humanistic skill in analyzing the historical record of the Serenissima during the early modern period, a subject