Reviews


This volume, inspired by papers given at a 2002 conference, achieves admirably its editors’ stated goal of furthering “dialogue between and among academic disciplines, departments, and outlooks,” presenting scholarship on both the theorized body and its praxis by scholars of art, architecture, literature, medicine, history, and philosophy (x). Many of its fifteen authors invoke theory and methodology from multiple disciplines, demonstrating that the body, real or idealized, requires a multivalent approach.

The volume is divided into four sections: the body in the works and life of Petrarch, the body in science and philosophy, gender and the body, and bodily movement. Certain themes echo across these categories. For instance, both Margaret Brose and Luca Marcozzi discuss ambivalence for the material body. Brose examines Petrarch’s use of bodily metaphors of the disguising veil and Marcozzi considers Petrarch’s use of the body-as-prison. Tullia D’Aragona’s negation of her own body in favor of her mind, demonstrated in an essay by Julia Hairston, becomes that much more comprehensible in light of the essay by Sergius Kodera, who highlights the common usage of the vocabulary of female prostitution as a metaphor for and critique of bodily and other materiality. As the two examples indicate, gender and sexuality are also major threads running through the volume, not only in the section specifically dedicated to gender. Scholars and students of masculinity will find rich material in these essays. Ronald Martinez’ close reading of Petrarch’s leg-wounding encounter with a
volume of Cicero reveals the poet’s myriad anxieties pertaining both to his career and especially to his identity as a man and father. Male desire features in several essays: Albert Ascoli’s commentary on Orlando Furioso pairs its male characters’ desire to possess virgins with their own longing to be virginal, or unpenetrated on the field of battle, while Anthony Colantuono interprets images of phallic birds as warnings against excessive or misplaced desire. The sensual body of St. Sebastian, according to Bette Talvacchia, became an object of desire for both men and women. Renaissance humankind had, it seems, something of a love-hate relationship with flesh and bone.

As Elizabeth Horodowich makes plain in her essay, body studies continue to be informed by conceptions of disciplined or controlled bodies first promulgated by Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias. For Horodowich, this discipline is exercised by the Venetian government’s increased efforts to tame unruly, gossipy, and treasonous tongues, while Douglas Biow shows the complex ways in which sixteenth-century men sought to tame their beards. Sandra Schmidt details the way in which Arcangelo Tuccaro sought to elevate tumbling to intellectual discourse, to move it from lower-body entertainment to upper-body science. Bodies covered or uncovered, still or in motion, were crucial indicators of the increasing divide in class and status between elite and common.

Finally, this reader was struck by the variety of ways in which the body can be a lens to view and complicate medieval and early modern Italian spirituality. For example, in this collection we experience the struggles not only of Petrarch, but also, according to Walter Stephens’ essay, of Marsilio Ficino and Psellus, to synchronize the relationship between body and spirit, both personally and intellectually. Other essays make plain the physicality of the spiritual: the search for physical, bodily evidence of female spirituality in the “holy autopsies” described by Katherine Park; the fifteenth-century female portrait busts that Jeanette Kohl argues evoke both images of the Madonna Lactans and female reliquary busts; and the painful and emotive process of pilgrimage detailed in D. Medina Lasansky’s fascinating article on the sacri monti of San Vivaldo and Varello where pilgrims experienced the passion through kneeling, crawling, and crying.
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).