Weaver, Elissa B. *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xiv, 304. ISBN 0-521-55082-3. Hardback, US.\$ 65.00.

Elissa Weaver enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a respected scholar whose scholarship is thorough and instructive. Weaver's recent work, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* is no exception. Directing her study largely to Tuscany, Weaver discusses an extensive body of convent theatrical works as she chronicles the life of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century nuns whose creative labours include the production and presentation of theatre intended to teach and entertain their convent sisters.

Elissa Weaver not only reveals the extent of the artistic activities of these nuns, she also offers glimpses of interesting, independent women who, although cloistered, managed to keep apprised of contemporary trends in Renaissance theatre as well as develop and present their own productions in step with current theatrical fashion. The somewhat malleable boundaries of monastery walls existed because these daughters of the church were never entirely disconnected from the secular life around them. Commerce was carried on as goods were delivered and collected at their portal and lay women made frequent calls to visit daughters or other relatives in the convents. These visitors also attended theatrical productions presented by the nuns. Some lay women enjoyed sojourns within the monasteries for spiritual retreat or rest. Weaver explains that convents were an important part of the urban landscape. By the fifteenth century many of the convents that previously had stood outside city walls had moved inside for safety. With the establishment of new convent houses their population expanded throughout Italy. Weaver notes that in 1552 women religious accounted for 11.5 to 13 percent of the female population of the city of Florence; the number of patrician women within convent walls was much higher.

In chapter two Weaver looks at the convent theatre tradition noting that the custom of presentation of plays in convents and monasteries is an old one. Among the examples given are the plays of the canoness Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim (c. 935-c. 973). Like nuns elsewhere, Italian nuns seem to have been drawn to the *laude drammatiche*, and the *sacre rappresentazioni* from the beginning of the tradition. This chapter includes a fascinating discussion of the exhaustive stage directions included in the script of *La Commedia di Judit*, an anonymous sixteenth-century Judith play. Staging notes provide detailed descriptions of what Judith should wear along with the reason for each item of her costume. Movement for the actress playing Judith is also choreographed: "she should walk with a solemn, decorous, and chaste gait ..."

Weaver keeps her inquiring eye trained largely on the creative aspects of these nuns, providing an illuminating examination of their theatre, how they staged plays, arranged funding and about the works of certain convent women playwrights such as Antonia Tannini Pulci and Beatrice del Sera. Readers familiar with Beatrice del Sera through Weaver's earlier work on *Amor di Virtù* will enjoy reading further about the nun and playwright in chapter three. Beatrice del Sera was two years old when she entered the convent and remained there until her death. If the word "feminist" were in use in the fifteenth/sixteenth century it would sure-

ly apply to Beatrice del Sera. In *Amor di Virtù*, del Sera has a character, Aurabeatrice, protest against the isolation and confinement of women. Weaver tells us that "the grim opening of the manuscript introduces the author and the theme most central to the play, the unjust treatment of women." Another character in the plays declares "they are women not pictures to hang on a wall." Weaver observes that del Sera's message is clear: "women have been put in the convent and left there, as one hangs a picture and need not think of it again."

Weaver does not ignore the Church's reactions to the theatrical aspirations of the nuns, and in some cases, their opposition to what the clergy deemed to be a conflict between their creative activities and their role as women religious. For instance, the nuns resisted orders to cease theatrical presentations in which they wore men's clothing, mustaches and beards to portray various male roles in plays. Even the most sombre reader may smile at the image of these nuns sporting mustaches and beards.

Chapter five, follows various plays and authors from "manuscript to print, from the convent to the world" providing an informative examination of the development of various women writers who were receiving "serious notice from the outside world." One such example was Maria Clemente Ruoti, who in 1649 became the first woman and only nun to be inducted into the Florentine Academy of the Apatisti. In chapter six, the concluding chapter, Weaver moves beyond Tuscany to look at how convent theatre flourished in the rest of the Italian peninsula and points beyond: probably in all Catholic Europe and in the New World colonies.

Some may question Weaver's frequent use of the term "young boys" referring to presentations by confraternity members (18, 51, 52, 63, 73). It has been suggested by others that in the Italian Renaissance the term "youth" seemed to include men as old as age thirty-five (Ilaria Taddei, "Puerizia, Adolescenza, and Giovinezza" in *The Premodern Teenager*, Toronto: CRRS, 2002). However, this is a small issue that does not detract at all from this illuminating text that will clearly be of interest to scholars in disciplines as diverse as History, Women's Studies, Art History, Renaissance studies, and Italian as well as the study of religion—the latter because Weaver offers important insights into relations between the early modern church, lay piety and secular society. *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy* clearly demonstrates how theatre was an important part of convent life that provided education and entertainment for many nuns and for the female members of their families.

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Black, Robert. *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the twelfth to the Fifteenth Century*. Cambridge, UK and New York. Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xiv, 489. ISBN: 0-5214-0192-5.

In this book, Robert Black presents a study of the Latin curriculum of mediaeval and Renaissance Italy in its widest purview in order to show how the majority of those who learned Latin in this period actually did so at the elementary and secondary levels. He suggests that, to understand Renaissance education in practice,