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Grassi, Umberto. Bathhouses and Riverbanks: Sodomy in a Renaissance Republic

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Grassi, Umberto.

Bathhouses and Riverbanks: Sodomy in a Renaissance Republic.

Essays and Studies 49. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2021. Pp. 291. ISBN 978-0-7727-2198-3 (paperback) \$39.95.

After addressing the evolving nature of historical terminology for sexual acts—sexuality and homosexuality being modern constructs while sodomy and “sex against nature” are older nomenclatures—Umberto Grassi introduces his work. His is a study of the judicial records of the Republic of Lucca’s Office of Decency (*Offizio supra l’Onestà*) between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. These represent one of the peninsula’s largest gatherings of inquests into early modern sexual practices, after those generated by Venice’s Committee on Sodomites (*Collegium Subdomitarum*) and Florence’s Night Officers (*Officiali di Notte*). Grassi locates his work within the historiography of homosexualities as drawn from judicial archives, and his analysis constantly returns to a comparison with both Venice and Florence.

Grassi’s introduction speaks to the large historiographical moments attached to the topic: a sense of belonging, “social constructionism” versus “existentialism”; queer theories; single (homo/hetero) versus multiple binaries; the application of present-day concepts versus older categories like effeminacy, pederasty, and male companionship; the rapports between queer theory and diachronic history; and the tendency in English-speaking literature to favour the cultural (literary and visual) over quantification and analyses of criminal archives.

His critical historiographical review reprimands historians for their indifference to the lower classes of society, something that he aims to remedy, noting a few exceptions (the works of Zeb Tortorici and others who identify sodomitical networks and subcultures in early modern Spain, Portugal, and their colonies). Grassi underscores Lucca’s similarities with this Iberian template. These works subvert Randolph Trumbach’s dominant model (gender inversion and networks emerged first in modern northern Europe, while premodern models followed classical pederasty with adults in a position of power penetrating those of both sexes who were socially inferior to them).

Grassi’s introduction is non-linear. He does not address the chapters that will build his book but rather the layered conclusions that his material engenders. This makes for a tricky, somewhat disarticulated reading of what will follow. His introduction is not a series of hypotheses, or historical questions, but

a series of concluding remarks with which he builds his narrative. The author does state what could be considered a thesis: “This book explores what kind of cultural constructions and social performances favoured the diffusion and relative acceptability of homosexual behaviour among the young” (20). But, candidly, I did not find a convincing response in my reading, or the author failed at leading this reader towards his conclusions. The book is a series of analyses that do not respond directly to an opening question. Further, his conclusion does not address his introduction; rather, it proposes a new historical question that explores the social impact of the Reformation on sexual practices and Catholic responses. Additionally confusing, the bathhouses and riverbanks that figure prominently in the title are mostly non-existent in the book’s analysis or its index.

Grassi presents his analysis in some twelve chapters. Starting with a first section on the Office of Decency and its regulation of sodomy, judicial practice, anxieties and compromises, there follows a section on social practices and emotions (male same-sex desire, ages, women, children and adolescents, sexual acts and homoerotic feelings), and two further sections on post-Tridentine Lucca.

In the following, I will highlight some of the book’s themes. Grassi argues that while his sources will suggest the abuse of younger, socially inferior individuals by adults in positions of authority, they also defend reciprocity and the existence of a homoerotic culture, in which age differences and sexual roles were blurred if not eliminated. Lucca’s judicial archives, with all their caveats and focus on active and passive roles, show that young early modern Lucchese men (between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five) met on specific spots (here are the riverbanks) to enjoy sex without violence. Lucchese authorities considered these encounters to be minor offences, but, after the Council of Trent, they favoured the prosecution of heterosexual sodomy. The seven tables in his appendix itemize punishments according to statutes; professions; age of the accused; defendants and convicts; and hetero versus homosexual sodomy; and they are revealing even if largely unused by the author.

Grassi adds a second layer of emotional dimension to his quantitative analysis. He wants to demonstrate that existing historiography has wrongly estimated the level of early modern emotions, and argues that homosexual feelings found their place in heterosexual families/friend/relations, thus granting an “affective dimension” to homoerotic bonds. He adds—somewhat puzzling—that young people were not seen as objects but were granted agency and

could be the subject of desire, while the tendency to blame victims continued, as the product of the dominant patriarchal substrata. Hence young men and women found themselves in a similar situation in relation to their “aggressors.” Interestingly, the author highlights the tendency by female accusers to use sodomy as a motif of accusation against abusive parents or partners.

Grassi then adds a third layer, religious confessionalism and sexual non-conformity that looks more closely at Lucchese pro-Calvinists. Still, in more general terms, it seems that both Catholics and Protestants used the accusation of sodomy—unreproductive sexuality equating the repudiation of Christianity—to attack their adversaries.

This leads to a fourth layer, the motivations of the archive producers, the Lucchese institutions. Here, institutions mediated and minimized heresies to protect their citizens and their own independence vis-à-vis Rome and its Holy Office. Grassi demonstrates that Lucca resisted the Holy Office and the centralizing post-Tridentine Church, with its own civic religion. Thus Lucchese authorities negotiated with Rome to have its tribunal deal with matters that could be considered ecclesiastical. It increased its check on sexual-nonconformity, as it remained tolerant in its punishment. The post-Tridentine valorization of marriage was bound to restrain any other forms of sexual activity and, even more so, non-procreating ones. In sum, Lucca tried to preserve its independence from Rome by eventually acting like Rome. Lucca brushed the embarrassing “unspeakable vice” under the carpet to focus on the surveillance of heterosexuals, promoting a new “normal” with checks on heterosexual deviancy (prostitution, fornication, concubinage, and anal intercourse).

This work does provide many interesting examples, raises many questions, challenges the historiography (the emphasis on heterosexual sodomy, for example), and is likely to gain an ample readership. Still, the reader is often guessing at its true aim. Grassi lacks what I would call the ability to control or organize his rich material in a way that pushes the argument forward. Grassi leads his readers down multiple paths that sometimes muddy rather than clarify what he wants to achieve. Still readers will find marvellous examples of past lives “lived” as they read through his densely packed prose.

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