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Murray, Jacqueline, ed. The Male Body and Social Masculinity in Premodern Europe

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Murray, Jacqueline, ed.

The Male Body and Social Masculinity in Premodern Europe.

Essays and Studies 56. Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022. Pp. 297 + 47 ill. ISBN 978-0-7727-1114-4 (paperback) \$39.95.

In her introduction to the volume, editor Jacqueline Murray writes, “The male body and masculinity were inextricably entwined, and, for premodern men, they were imbued with ambiguity, mutability, and contradiction” (9). The essays here consider this claim from a variety of perspectives, ultimately assembling a provocative and useful volume.

The volume’s first section, “Imperfect Bodies: Gender and Social Liminality,” takes us immediately into case studies that showcase the precarity of the male physical experience. Two essays in this section take the broadest view and discuss social organization and practice. In “‘If my sons will have no male heir’: Legal and Social Solutions to a Sieneſe Patriarchal Dread,” Elena Brizio examines legal and other archival documentation to consider the dilemma of families with only female children in the Italian Renaissance. This situation presented, intriguingly, not solely a challenge for passing on inheritance but also for the patriarch, whose claim to social power was weakened if he did not possess potent enough masculinity to produce surviving sons. In “Exterior Bodies, Interior Ascent: Corporeality in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century *Conversi*,” Alison More turns our attention to the figure of the laybrother in Cistercian communities. She finds that these men “because of the liminal nature of their vocation—between the monastic and secular worlds—led to some mistrust” (44), yet hagiographers recognized their holiness.

A pair of other essays in this first section turn to more concrete discussions of bodily function and draw our attention to sexual reproduction—Sara Berkowitz’s “‘Unmaking the Masculine Body’: Representations of *Castrati* in the Seventeenth Century” and Yvonne Petry and Kiegan Lloyd’s “‘What do they mean by a potent man?’ Medical Views on Impotence in Early Modern France.” Berkowitz helps us see an important distinction for the volume as those who have been castrated remain men but are not perceived as masculine men. She argues that it is this very liminal subject position that allows the castrati so much political power as they are deemed safe male entrants into courtly relations and social circles. Finally, H. Peter Johnsson’s “The Scissors or the Sword: The Polyvalent Role of Hair in Merovingian Gaul” reminds us of

the particularities of the male body and how aesthetic appearance influences perceptions of masculinity. Johnson's essay focuses on the oldest case study in the volume, the sixth-century culture of the Franks, where hair length signalled not only masculine identity but also social class (where the kings wore their hair the longest).

The second section, "Perfect Bodies: Masculinity, Idealism, and Contingency," offers intriguing considerations of how the very reification of the male body as ideal opens it to critique and precarity. Maya Corry's "The Homoerotics of Power: Art and Desire in Leonardo's Milan" chooses the Sforza court in late fifteenth-century Milan as its focus in order to analyze how erotic bonds between men could cement bonds within networks of influence. The essay is accompanied by gorgeous colour images, as is Tatiana C. String's "Body Building: The Fabrication of the Masculine Body in Renaissance Portraiture." This second essay analyzes portraits to show how masculinity was "continually updated, performed, and worked at," a project potentially obviated by the way that visual depictions could "perform their ideal selves, or one version at least, each and every time they were viewed" (230). Fabien Lacouture traces an interesting genealogy of representations of Saint John the Baptist, who has been portrayed as a hermit, as a suffering teen, an athlete, and a sexually ambiguous young man. In "The Masculinity of Saint John the Baptist in Renaissance Italian Painting: From Hermit to Athlete of Christ," the author considers the evolution of this figure through a sculpture by Donatello as well as paintings by Domenico Veneziano, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael.

An interesting counterpoint to the discussion of homoeroticism in the volume is Timothy McCall's essay. In "Towards a History of Signorial Sexuality: Borso d'Este and the Gestures of Courtly Masculinity," he looks at the way that heterosexual relations subtended courtly ones and networks of power. Accompanying images invite us to see how even portraits that depict the bachelor lord of Ferrara as effeminate actually underscore his masculine and sexual prowess. The discussion of this case study thus "seek[s] to avoid transhistorical or presentist models of masculinity and sexuality" (160). One of the most evocative essays in the volume is Ivana Elbl's "A 'Great Man' Who Became a Virgin: The Masculinity of Prince Henry the 'Navigator.'" The analysis explores the inherent contradiction in Henry's idealized masculinity in heresy in his great deeds and service to state with his professed virginity. Elbl insightfully renders visible how these discourses regarding heroism and purity

are tied to sexualized concepts of the racialized infidel against which Henry positioned himself.

Taken as a whole, the volume will be of interest to scholars who study gender, masculinity, the body, courtly power, and visual culture.

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