Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme

Wojciehowski, Hannah Chapelle. Group Identity in the Renaissance World

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Citer ce compte rendu

Weber's *Approaches* brings together essays that offer a range of perspectives for the teaching of Spanish mysticism at different levels and in different academic contexts. The collection thus testifies to the intellectual currency of Spanish mysticism in art history, or women's and religious studies, well beyond its usual place in Spanish literature and culture classes. Various essays can be used as assigned readings; presenting summaries of significant trends in mysticism scholarship, they can provide valuable directions for future research.

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Wojciehowski, Hannah Chapelle.
Group Identity in the Renaissance World.
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This is an exceptionally well researched, handsomely produced, and often intriguing book. The bibliography runs to 25 dense pages, and 40 illustrations complement the text. Quantitative measures, however, fail to fully acknowledge the breadth of the author's research. *Group Identity in the Renaissance World* examines encounters between groups throughout the early modern period and on several continents. While the work clearly centres on the European Renaissance, it extends to Brazil, the Caribbean, the Portuguese colony of Goa in India, and the animal-hospitals of Gujarat.

Each chapter begins with an example, often taking the form of a brief narrative, then enters into an exploration of what the example might reveal about a group. The introduction begins with descriptions of Raphael's paintings *The School of Athens* and *Mount Parnassus*. The first chapter then begins with the recovery of the Laocoön in 1506. Other chapters concern the destruction of a Buddhist relic in Sri Lanka, Thomas More's visit to Antwerp where he drafted part of his *Utopia*, and the voyages of the fascinating Pietro della Valle, who travelled throughout the Middle East and India, accompanied part of the time by his beautiful Circassian bride and the rest of the time by her embalmed corpse and their adopted daughter, whom he later married. Again, the sheer breadth of Wojciehowski's study impresses and her anecdotes intrigue. Few

scholars would not benefit by reading this book, for the simple reason that few minds could possibly be comprehensive enough not to be informed by something in the range of material the book presents.

Unfortunately, the work remains unconvincing. The elements that the author chooses to highlight often seem tangential to the works in which they appear. For instance, she ties More's description of slavery in Utopia to his probably witnessing early European slavery in Antwerp. However, she offers no instance of More actually referring to this early and illicit practice. If it informs More's description of slavery in Utopia, it does so silently. Similarly, she places great emphasis on Hamlet's use of the word "machine" in his letter to Ophelia, noting that it is one of only two uses of the word in Shakespeare's canon, but fails to note that "engine," which she treats as identical in other early modern European examples, occurs frequently in Shakespeare. The term is unusual, but is the idea it indicates really so remarkable? If the idea were remarkable, that might show it to be a key to understanding the identities of groups in the Renaissance, but might also just mark the idea as completely anomalous. Wojciehowski's chapter on della Valle concentrates on his possible responses to Jainism and Hinduism in India, with their very different treatments of human remains and of the soul. "Writing during an era of rapidly accelerating cultural transformation, della Valle was perplexed and at times troubled by the Eastern cultural matrices that he resisted but that he had also deliberately sought out," she declares (301–02). None of her quotations of him show him to be particularly perplexed or troubled, however. On the contrary, della Valle's search for practices alien to his own beliefs might indicate confident assurance in his own belief system. In fact, Wojciehowski notes that in Pythagoreanism, European travellers had a ready-made explanation for Indian beliefs in reincarnation and ethics of kindness to animals, and even cites Tristam Stuart to the effect that "the concept of nonviolence, a far more profound challenge to European morality of that time, was essentially lost on the visitors to India" (296). At times, she seems to simply assume that cross-cultural contact must inspire anxiety, rather than convincingly showing that her exemplary travellers suffered from such anxiety. Moreover, she concentrates largely on European anxieties, making no reference to whether Asian travellers in Europe were also perplexed and troubled to find themselves confronted by Christian beliefs. On the whole, Wojciehowski seems to regard anxiety in the face of a cultural other

as a specifically European weakness, one proven inevitably by the absence as well as presence of evidence.

I think that at least some of the weaknesses of this book arise from its largely Freudian theoretical framework. The author argues that groups "are somewhat like dreams: they are structured in ways that are obscure and frequently allusive" (313). This allows Wojciehowski to examine how they are informed by narratives and metaphors, especially the metaphor of the body, which in turn leads her to conclude with a call for an historicized theory of embodied cognition. The book does not suffer from a lack of theoretical structure, so much as the multiplication of several theoretical structures, none fully argued and all therefore unconvincing. Moreover, the term "group" comes to mean an untenably wide range of things, starting with group representations in art, but embracing the body as a group of organs, the individual across its reincarnations in Jainist belief, the Portuguese community in India, Christians as a religious group, and even humankind in general. Wojciehowski explores the range of meanings, but the term "group" does not seem to designate a coherent concept.

This is really quite unfortunate, since Wojciehowski makes a number of valuable observations, and draws on a great deal of material not easily available. Most of the anecdotes, in fact, might have been expanded into monographs. There are certainly a number of things I have made notes to look up, not least whether a biography of della Valle has been published in a language that I read.

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