

On this final note, I turn to concerns about the language used in this work. The text is littered with clichés and colloquial language (for example, “they [nuns] punch above their numeric weight [...]” (107)) which is quite distracting in an academic text. Secondly, it reads much like a traditional dissertation. It opens with a review of literature (rather easily dismissing other studies as limiting), then examines the main theoretical perspectives, and from there moves on to individual chapters. Though this does not lessen the usefulness of the volume, again it is somewhat distracting. Finally, the use of the dated and exclusionary terms “man” and “mankind” seems jarringly out of place in a text so otherwise centrally focused on the subjectivity of women.

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Weaver, Elissa B. *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women*. Cambridge, UK, New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. Pp. xiii + 304.

The massive increase in the number of convents in early modern Italy, established to advance and consolidate the interests of powerful families, forms the backdrop for the subject of this book: the curious and fascinating development of theatrical practice in female monasteries from the late fifteenth to late seventeenth centuries. At its very outset, the book performs a scholarly service by bringing this body of material, largely preserved in manuscripts in the *Biblioteca Riccardiana* and *Nazionale* in Florence, to our notice. As Weaver highlights in her subtitle, the purpose of these dramas was two-fold: release from the tedium and strictures of convent life and medium for (and display of) education – spiritual as well as humanist. In her careful documentation of the relationship between these plays and the secular culture which they both drew from and commented upon, Weaver also advances a theory of “sublimation.” After the Council of Trent, which enforced strict enclosure, the expansion of convent drama appears to function as compensation for the loss of worldly privileges formerly allowed to the nuns. Perhaps this was the reason why the ecclesiastical hierarchy tolerated it, albeit grudgingly.

In recent years there has been much rethinking of female monastic life in the field of medieval studies. The truism which once labelled convents “dumping grounds” for unwanted daughters of the nobility has been displaced by increased scholarly attention to the complex ways that nuns participated, socially as well as spiritually, in their broader environment. The concern with “vocation” has been sidelined, partly in recognition that apparent lapses in contemplative practice fail to take into consideration the interpenetration of spiritual and secular life in the Middle Ages. When Weaver raises the issue in her book, it is in a different context – the Florentine world of merchants, mobility, and money, where monastic life was indeed autonomous, sharply severed from the world of secular power and pleasure. The number of monasteries in Florence quadrupled between 1368 and 1595; Weaver cites one study which suggests that half of the women of “the urban propertied class” were destined to become nuns in the sixteenth century. In the wake of the Council of Trent, with its program of cementing in convent walls and prohibiting visits

even from family, female monastic life in early modern Florence appears quite different from that of an earlier time. In this context, it is indeed important to ask how these women coped with separation and what their psychic life was like.

Weaver sets the plays within this post-Tridentine context. Her subtle readings of the plays demonstrate how their themes often return to imprisonment, powerlessness, solitude, and suffering. While many of the plays argue for the superiority of the cloister over marriage, they still manage to raise the specter of desire for another life. Some of the plays, particularly those on the popular theme of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, may have worked to assuage the fears of novices, leading them towards acceptance of their new situation. Weaver's book documents diverse genres within the convent tradition, moving from the *sacra rappresentazione* and the hybrid "spiritual comedy" to the farce. Although she has unearthed rich documentation of performances of many different kinds of plays in the early modern convent, she concentrates on those plays that seem to have been authored as well as performed by nuns themselves. These plays speak most forcefully to the concerns of the cloistered women as they translated their vision of their lives into comic and tragic heroines. For instance, the comedy *Amor di virtù*, written by Beatrice del Sera, a nun of the Dominican convent of San Niccolò in Prato, reworked the romance of Fleur and Blanchefleur, known in Italy through Boccaccio's *Filocolo*. In her discussion of this play, Weaver argues that the author expands her sources to criticize the practice of locking up and forgetting about women in addition to inserting self-referential artistic statements that highlight Beatrice's own use of imagination as consolation for her seclusion. In this way, Weaver's book provides glimpses into the lives of these women whose voices history has silenced. The convent life, with its emphasis on learning and literacy, gave the women the tools and means of representation to speak about their condition, and Weaver shows how eloquently and cleverly they did so.

From close attention to notations in manuscripts, Weaver also discusses the nuns' interest in elaborate staging, scene division, costuming, musical accompaniment, and other forms of theatricality (the appendix includes transcriptions of some of this material). It is particularly instructive to note how closely convent drama followed contemporary trends in the secular theatre. Although officially prohibited from witnessing these convent spectacles, laity, particularly lay women, attended these plays to the extent that convents could gain a reputation for their entertainment. While circumstances varied from convent to convent, in some cases it is clear that the plays address an audience beyond the immediate monastic community. Weaver points to the increased popularity of this tradition beyond the convent walls in the seventeenth century as nuns' plays were published – and even written – for a broader audience, thus bringing cloistered women into contemporary literary and feminist debates.

Although a literary critic, Weaver is attentive to the historiography of monasticism and the production and transmission of documents. The fifth chapter, "From Manuscript to Print," discusses the circulation of the nuns' plays

beyond the cloister. In a footnote, she also conjectures that the large body of work she draws from in the *Riccardiana* may have been collected because of its similarity to secular drama, thus explaining the preservation of a form that would have had little value before the recent interest in premodern women's writing. This book is carefully designed to answer the kinds of questions that inevitably arise from the presentation of a wholly new subject to an audience. The final chapter, "Beyond Tuscany," situates the plays examined in the book in a broader context, both temporally and geographically. While this chapter demonstrates that there is much work to be done on tracing this phenomenon in other Catholic countries in Western Europe and linking this tradition with the liturgical drama in women's convents in the Middle Ages, Weaver's book also makes a strong, historically-specific and geographically-situated argument about the particularities of Early Modern convent drama in Tuscany. Perhaps it was precisely the context of the Florentine Renaissance, the locus of such rapid cultural and artistic change, that fostered awareness of enforced seclusion in the cloister, where the nuns cultivated a dramatic form that traversed the line between two starkly different worlds.

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Wheeler, Bonnie, ed. *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman*. The New Middle Ages Series. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.
Pp. xxii + 394.

Heloise, as student, *concubinae*, and wife to Peter Abelard, has been the subject of critical study and romantic speculation for over four centuries. As John Marenbon states in his essay "Authenticity revisited," in this collection, once feminist scholars began to look at medieval subjects, "Heloise could not but loom large" (27). Female scholars and feminists alike have paid her particularly close attention due to her position as a powerful, meaningful, *historical* woman¹ in the Middle Ages whose accomplishments and life story can be held up as an example against male-authored fictions (fictions which, it must be said, too often become the basis for most students' first exposure to medieval "women"). Heloise is unique for us in that we can know her, perhaps, more intimately than Hildegard, Margery Kempe, or Christine de Pizan. Our sense of intimacy with Heloise is based upon our experience of her through her letters to Abelard which articulate her desire for him, a desire so powerful that, when prohibited by family and church, it eventually becomes physically painful for her, and, through her, for her readers. Heloise is, of course, too often seen as anomalous because she holds such a unique historical, literary, and spiritual position in the Middle Ages as a woman whose initial claim to fame is a broken heart and who did not seek the cloister for solace or out of devotion but was placed there, "conventualized" (Ward and Chiavaroli, 59), for her own safety and survival. The aim of this collection is not to diminish her presence as a female intellectual in the twelfth century (one who serves, as Brown and Peiffer write, as "the one and only person in Europe Abelard tolerated as an intellectual equal or superior," [143]), but rather to illuminate, as well, her presence as a possible model for a genuine experience of the feminine in the Middle Ages. As Bonnie Wheeler writes in the introduction to the