

Mary F. Thurlkill, *Chosen among Women: Mary and Fatima in Medieval Christianity and Shi'ite Islam*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Pp. 209.

“**F**átima de los naufragios,” a short story by Lourdes Ortiz, illustrates the ambivalence felt by many Spaniards toward Moroccan immigrants. This story, set in a small fishing village on the Andalusian coast, centers on an enigmatic woman who appears one day on the beach, where she lives for months, refusing to interact with the residents. She is eventually identified by another, more talkative recent arrival as Fatima, a Moroccan whose husband and son drowned when their small boat capsized during a turbulent crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar. The townsfolk attempt to integrate this silent *dolorosa* into their community by bringing her food (without pork) and by recasting her as “Nuestra Señora de las pateras,” Our Lady of the small boats in which so many African immigrants lose their lives attempting to enter Europe. While Ortiz highlights the shared Christian and Islamic idealization of holy mothers, she also shows the violence at the heart of these idealized constructions. At the

end of the story, the villagers silently watch as the woman, after mourning over the corpse of a young black man that washed up on shore, walks into the sea, drowning herself. The villagers’ desire to see her play out the symbolic role they cast onto her overrides their humanitarian concerns, so they collude in her death.¹

Mary F. Thurlkill’s comparative analysis of the figures of Mary and Fatima leaves me with an uncomfortable feeling, as does Ortiz’s short story. On the one hand, Thurlkill’s study introduces readers who know little about Fatima to the construction of this holy mother in Shi’ite Islam, increasing awareness of this very important figure whose popularity in Islamic countries rivals that of Mary in Catholic ones. On the other hand, her approach downplays the many differences and disjunctions between the history, construction, and significance of these two figures, effectively forcing Fatima to become more like Mary; this, despite Thurlkill’s evident attempts to give both idealized women equal time.

As Thurlkill demonstrates, both Mary and Fatima are constructed as idealized, virginal mothers each of whose son’s death becomes the

focus of a religious community, Christianity and Shi'ite Islam. While the construction of Fatima is influenced by that of Mary, the reverse is not true, especially since Thurlkill limits her study of Marian theology to 200-750 CE and focuses primarily on Merovingian Gaul (for reasons that are not clearly articulated). Shi'ite traditions concerning Fatima developed in Egypt, Persia, and Yemen, 750-1000 CE. These geographic and temporal disjunctions require Thurlkill to rely on universalizing theories to inform her analysis of parallel constructions and uses of these two holy mothers.

Despite her over-emphasis on similarities, Thurlkill does explore how some profound differences between early Christianity and Shi'ite Islam result in different constructions of Mary and Fatima. Chapter 1 provides a useful overview of the history of Mary and Fatima in their respective traditions. Chapter 2 studies the hagiography of the two holy mothers in both scholarly and popular traditions. Thurlkill's discussion of Shi'ite hadith collections is a nice introduction to the topic, although she fails to justify her preference for the non-canonical nineteenth-century Persian collection of Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi.

In chapter 3, Thurlkill provides a persuasive comparative analysis of the construction and significance of the figure of the virgin mother in Christianity and Shi'ite Islam. This chapter is the most successful since it provides a balanced, thoroughly-contextualized examination of the similarities and differences between Mary and Fatima. Chapter 4 focuses on male authors' parallel uses of Mary and Fatima to promote certain female behaviors while limiting women to the domestic sphere. Chapter 5, which focuses on art and architecture, is the least successful; while Thurlkill articulates how rich and powerful Merovingian women used their patronage of Marian art and architecture to increase their access to the divine, her discussion of Fatima in Shi'ite art and architecture is tentative and makes almost no mention of women as art consumers or patrons. It is here that the underlying Western bias becomes most transparent.

Despite my reservations, I do recommend Thurlkill's study. At the present, there is a great hunger on the part of American students and scholars to learn more about Islam, and Thurlkill's monograph addresses that hunger. I would not teach the book as a whole in an undergraduate

course due to its problematic asymmetries. Nonetheless, Thurlkill's analysis of parallel yet different constructions of Mary and Fatima illuminates some fundamental aspects of medieval Christianity and Islam that will be of interest to many.

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END NOTE

1. Lourdes Ortiz, "Fátima de los naufragios," *Fátima de los naufragios* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1998), pp. 7-22.



David Michael D'Andrea,
Civic Christianity in Renaissance Italy: The Hospital of Treviso, 1400-1530. University of Rochester Press, 2007. Pp. **xiii + 214**

In this study of the Scuola di Santa Maria dei Battuti in the Venetian subject town of Treviso, David D'Andrea makes the provocative argument that the subjugation of a city to a regional power could engender the transformation of a local confraternity into a "rallying place for civic pride" (6). The confraternity in question, Santa Maria dei Battuti, traced its

origins to a thirteenth-century devotional movement that spawned numerous flagellant sodalities throughout the Italian peninsula. In addition to Treviso, confraternities dedicated to Santa Maria dei Battuti (literally St. Mary of the Beaten, in reference to the members' practice of flagellating themselves) dominated the confraternal life of other Venetian subject towns, like Conegliano and Pordenone. These confraternities absorbed competing brotherhoods and eventually became the center of the subject towns' spiritual and civic life.

D'Andrea organizes his account of the Battuti of Treviso, which covers the period between 1400 and 1530, into an introduction and six chapters. The opening chapters describe the history of the confraternity and the development of its hospital. D'Andrea draws a parallel between, on the one hand, the social, ritual, and political importance of the Battuti to Treviso and, on the other, the tactical and economic value of the city to the mainland empire of Venice. He persuasively demonstrates how Venice aided the Battuti in its rise to dominance by suppressing rival sodalities and how the confraternity itself functioned as a surrogate for the political autonomy denied