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## Review of Christine Meek, ed., *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe*

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Christine Meek, ed., *Women in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe*.

Dublin, Ireland and Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2000. 230 pp. \$55. ISBN: 1-85182-423-5.

This collection of essays has many very fine pieces, but there is really no coherent theme that ties them together. While it is about women in the Renaissance and early modern Europe (Meek covers her bases by using both terms), the essays are very specialized. They do not provide the wide coverage of material that the title implies and the title would never suggest the specifics in the book. Rather, as a collection that grew out of a conference held at Trinity College Dublin in 1998, some of the essays connect with each other, while others are of very different genres and approaches. Several of the essays deal with representations of women in art and literature. Both witchcraft and religious lives of women are also considered in several essays. Geographically, most of the essays are centered in France, Italy, or Ireland.

The essays about Ireland, which is rarely considered in books on women in Europe, are well worth reading. Elizabeth McKenna's essay on women as patrons of the arts in medieval Ireland provides fascinating insights on a little known subject, though McKenna also suggests that the evidence is only fragmentary. Mary O'Dowd's essay argues that colonialism played a more important role than patriarchy for early modern Irish women. Bernadette Williams writes about Alice Kyteler, a wealthy Irish woman accused of witchcraft in 1324; this trial is particularly interesting since it was the first to accuse a woman of securing her power through sexual intercourse with the devil. As Williams demonstrates, it is also interesting because of Kyteler's success as an entrepreneur. Christine Meek's essay on late medieval Lucca also considers the subjects of magic and witchcraft. She finds that one reason

people resorted to magic was for treatment of illnesses. Other reasons were to change people's attitudes — to cause someone to feel love, or to make someone who wielded their power cruelly, such as the owner who beat a slave, change their ways. Meek has found some fascinating examples, including a former slave of Greek extraction named Zita, who practiced magic for some time until her arrest and probable execution. Meek argues that belief in magic was so endemic that women and men, wealthy and powerless, all would have recourse to magic if they thought it might be helpful.

Several of the essays deal with representations. Catherine Lawless discusses the representations of widowhood in fifteenth-century Florence, focusing on St. Anne. St. Anne was very unusual as a female saint: she was a mother and a thrice-married widow. Sacha Fegan analyzes how closely the representations of the prostitute in seventeenth-century Dutch painting reflected their actual lives and what this suggests about Dutch culture. Derval Conroy considers representations of queens in French classical drama and culture, examining plays by women. Like Ireland, France, particularly in the seventeenth century, is very well represented in this collection. There is not only the Conroy essay and one by Carol Baxter, the theme of representations is also continued in an essay by Susanne Reid on fictional and political representations of motherhood in the reign of Louis XIV. Reid is especially insightful about the impact of the Church on women's views of their own lives.

Several of the essays deal with women in religious orders. Francesca Medioli discusses enclosures of nuns before and after the Council of Trent. She compares the phenomenon from 1298-1563 and from 1563-1789. From the Council of Trent to the French Revolution the leaders of the Catholic Church believed that *clausura* — enclosure of nuns — was the only method that would allow reform and prevent scandals, despite how much the nuns themselves resented it. Carol Baxter also discusses nuns; her essay centers on ideas about the body among the nuns of Port-Royal in seventeenth-century France and finds that this group of nuns felt great happiness since they perceived themselves as the vanguard of the spiritual renewal of French society.

Meek's collection contains a number of very fine essays. It joins the many essay collections on this general theme that have been published in the last two decades, and demonstrates that the study of Renaissance / early modern European women is a thriving one.

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