

## Book Reviews

GUIDO RUGGIERO, *The boundaries of Eros: sex crime and sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 8vo, pp. vii, 223, £25-00.

The sexual mores of Venice have fascinated the English-speaking world since at least the early seventeenth century, when Thomas Coryat discovered the city's courtesans to be "so loose that they are said to open their quivers to every arrow". A high point of a sometimes prurient interest came with the appearance of *Leggi e memorie venete sulla prostituzione*, an opulent folio volume published at the expense of Lord Orford between 1870 and 1872, and intended, presumably, for collectors of arcane erotica. Guido Ruggiero now adds a more detached historical perspective on the subject. His book centres on sex crime, and deals with the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is based on detailed research in the Venetian archives, the criminal records of which provide exceptionally rich documentation of sexual mores and attitudes. Five areas of criminality are explored. Two of them, fornication and adultery, were considered relatively unimportant. They were infrequently prosecuted, and cases appear mainly to have come to court when the consequences of sexual acts, such as the birth of a child, called for some legal intervention. Here the concern of the state was with reconstituting the family and protecting property, not with the eradication of vice. Sex crimes against God (sexual relations with the clergy, with members of religious orders or with Jews, sexual misconduct in holy places) were treated more seriously. So, too, was rape, at least in the case of the rape of children or of noblewomen. Sentences for rapes of this kind might be severe, involving corporal punishments such as the amputation of a hand, or the excision of an eye. Where, however, the victim was an unmarried girl of marriageable age and of no superior social status, the rapist might be penalized with little more than a slap on the wrist. Sodomy, in particular homosexual sodomy, was in fact unique in terms of the forceful response which it evoked from the Venetian authorities. 514 individuals are known to have been prosecuted between 1326 and 1500, the normal punishment being death by burning. In contrast to later practice in England (where Louis Crompton's recent *Byron and Greek love* has documented some eighty hangings for sodomy in the first three decades of the nineteenth century), the concept of homosexual sodomy in Venice did not necessarily involve anal penetration. External simulation of intercourse could equally incur the death penalty.

Venice's dismal record of tortures and executions for practices which no longer appal us makes at times for depressing reading. The saving grace of the book is Guido Ruggiero's analysis and his approach to his subject. Much of his interest focuses on the mentality of the prosecutors, the Venetian nobility. He pays elaborate attention to judicial rhetoric as an indicator of changing attitudes, though, regrettably, he does not quote the original Latin or Italian vocabulary, even for terms as central as "adultery" or "fornication". He rightly argues that, in setting sexual boundaries, legal records reflect society's perception of "normal" sexuality. Hence the book is more than a study of sexual deviance. It has much to say about courtship, marriage, and more mundane sexual mores, documenting, amongst much else, a case of *coitus interruptus* as a means of birth control. The book argues for the emergence in the Renaissance of two competing cultures of sexuality, licit and illicit. The latter, if less coherent, was nonetheless real, and it is even presented, with some overstatement, as crucial in the development of the west. The problem here is the slight—inevitably slight—documentation of the illicit culture. For instance, the author's claim that a homosexual subculture developed in fifteenth-century Venice rests solely on the evidence that defendants at that time appear to have had more sexual partners, and that certain places (such as schools of music and gymnastics, darkened church doorways, pastry and apothecary shops) became objects of suspicion to the authorities. In this area there is room for debate, as on the question of why change should have occurred at this particular time. Here the general concept of "Renaissance" has some relevance, and it should be noted that it is applied here, controversially, to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, excluding the early sixteenth century when syphilis and religious change altered the sexual climate. Despite its sometimes grim subject matter, this is a fascinating book, which makes an important contribution to the history of sexuality.

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