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Grassi, Umberto. *Mediterranean Crossings: Sexual Transgressions in Islam and Christianity (10th-18th Centuries)*. Rome: Viella, 2020. Pp. 174. ISBN 978-8833134628. \$ 38.00 (paperback).

*Mediterranean Crossings: Sexual Transgressions in Islam and Christianity (10th-18th Centuries)* is comprised by an introduction and six chapters, all of which were written in or translated into English.<sup>1</sup> As the title suggests, this volume addresses issues of sexuality and transgression within the broader theme of Islamo-Christian relations. More specifically, *Medieval Crossings* emphasizes the representations and historical accounts of homoeroticism and homosexual encounters in the Mediterranean area during the medieval and early modern periods. Indeed, the book's six contributions cover a vast time frame of roughly eight centuries and engage with a variety of different genres: from poetry to medical literature and from legal documents to chronicles. This is undoubtedly an ambitious project, the results of which are far from disappointing. Although the essays vary in strength and cohesiveness, this collection as a whole offers numerous thought-provoking explorations of a deeply complex set of questions. As the editor, Umberto Grassi, outlines in his Introduction, the volume considers three main areas of inquiry: similarities and differences in how Christians and Muslims treated sexual morality; the possible relationship between interfaith conversions and issues of sexuality; and the position of “nonnormative sexualities” within the larger history of the Mediterranean (p. 10).

The articles are evenly divided into two sections titled “Definitions and Proscriptions” and “Interactions,” and are presented chronologically (with inevitable overlaps), beginning with Serena Tolino's discussion of female homoeroticism in pre-modern Islamicate societies—a topic which, as Tolino claims, has been largely neglected by modern scholarship. As the author points out, the word “Islamicate”—as opposed to “Islamic”—refers to a broad understanding of socio-historical phenomena associated with Islam, that go beyond the conceptual boundaries of Islam as a religion. Tolino then provides a three-part investigation of female homoeroticism by considering different disciplinary perspectives (or registers): lexicography, medical discourse, and Islamic law. Through a meticulous examination of Arabic terminology, Tolino insightfully proposes that her three-pronged approach allows us to envision different truths, each of which results from the different registers she utilizes in her analysis. The two remaining chapters of the first section similarly consider expressions of homoeroticism. Selim Kuru examines this topic in the fifteenth-century Ottoman Turkish poetry, noting how—while homoerotic desire was censored in other genres—rhymed lyric poetry in the Anatolian language uniquely served as a vessel for this theme. Like Tolino, Kuru, too, highlights the contrast between what was licit in literary discourse and prohibited by law. The main point here is that, while the latter unequivocally forbade homosexual practices, the former developed a sophisticated language to articulate and convey homoerotic desires. Kuru also points to the educational aims of these poems. To illustrate these questions, the author zooms in on two texts: *The Book that Repels Sorrow and Removes Anxiety* (ca. 1500) and *Fürkat-nâme/The Book of Separation* (1471). Vincenzo Lavenia's essay, alternatively, analyzes the relationship between sodomy and heresy, and how this theological nexus affected the perception of Islam, particularly of the Prophet Muhammad's alleged lasciviousness, in early modern Europe. By contextualizing the debates on so-called “sins/crimes against nature,” Lavenia contends that labeling the Islamic enemies as “sodomitic” helped Christian Europeans exorcize this perceived threat as something akin to an infection.

Turning now to the second section of *Mediterranean Crossings*, the first chapter is Tomás Antonio Mantecón Movellán's piece, which elegantly dovetails with the previous contributions by probing Christian-Muslim relations in seventeenth-century Spain through the lens of the history of sexuality. Purported sexual deviancy in Spain—Mantecón Movellán posits—was ascribed to the

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<sup>1</sup> Kalina Yamboliev, who translated four of the seven contributions, deserves a note of mention.

foreign contamination of native Spanish communities by Muslims and Jews. This chapter focuses on the way secular courts—rather than religious ones—treated this issue, even as it draws upon the *Compendio de las industrias en los ministerios de la Compañía de Jesús*, a tract authored by the Jesuit father Pedro de León between the last decades of the sixteenth-century and the early seventeenth-century. As this chapter illustrates, the word sodomy was used to define a multiplicity of different phenomena; with this in mind, the *Compendio* offers illuminating insights into the complex construction of individual sexual identities and striking snapshots of the homoerotic subcultures of early modern Spain. Luiz Mott's essay focuses instead on the kingdom of Portugal, aptly analyzing the trial documents of dozens of defendants in cases of sodomy. What emerges from the study of these cases is the prevailing endogamy of these documented sexual relations: it was rare, as Mott suggests, that “Christians of ancient origins” would be involved with individuals of a different heritage. This chapter thus emphasizes the intermingling of homophobia and xenophobia in early modern Portugal. In the last essay, Umberto Grassi examines the issue of female conversion, paying particular attention to the story of Susanna Daza, a morisca (a Christian of Muslim origins) tried by the Sicilian Inquisition for her conversions: from Christianity to Islam first, and then to Judaism. In each of these instances, Susanna's conversion resulted from her relationship with a romantic partner who practiced either of these faiths. A few points are worth underscoring here. First, as Grassi argues, the practice of multiple conversions was not uncommon in the early modern period. Second, Susanna's case draws attention to the question of gender and conversion, problematizing the assumption that women were less prone than men to change their faith. Third, Susanna's relationships and apparently independent use of her body appear not only to undercut the rigor with which the Church enforced Christian orthodoxy, but also to destabilize the contours of early modern patriarchy. In sum, Susanna's multiple conversions—and the countless other narratives evoked in *Mediterranean Crossings*—epitomize the porous nature of interfaith and gender boundaries. This volume's emphasis on this religious porosity is certainly one of its strengths.

This reader's overall impression is that the chapters in the first section are more compelling and more tightly argued than those in the second section. Nevertheless, each contribution is in its own way both informative and well-researched. As noted at the outset of this review, *Mediterranean Crossings* is an ambitious project in both range and conceptual vision, as it also indirectly engages with ongoing debates on the relationships between Western societies and Islam's various forms (cultural, political, and of course theological). In this light, the present volume provides its readers with the opportunity to think about such questions from an original, provocative, and nuanced set of viewpoints. As an academic contribution, this collection of essays is particularly suitable for scholars whose work focuses on the Mediterranean and interfaith relations, as well as on the history of gender and sexuality.

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